

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

™We could have been anything we wanted to be  
But don't it make your heart glad  
That we decided (a fact we take pride in)  
We became the best at bein' bad.

- Paul Williams, ™Bad Guys

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## CONCEPT AND DEVELOPMENT

Rob Vaux

## ADDITIONAL WRITING

Martin Hall, Ree Soesbee

## MECHANICS DESIGN

Kevin Millard

## MECHANICS ASSISTANCE

Marshall Smith

## EDITING

Rob Vaux

## COVER

Ted Pendergraft

## INTERIOR DESIGN

Nate Barnes

## ARTISTIC HUGGY BEAR

jim pinto

## INTERIOR ART

Abrar Ajmal, Daerick Gråttss,  
Michel Koch, Ben Peck,  
Ted Pendergraft

## WEBSITE DESIGN

Dave Agoston

## FOR STUDIO 2

Jim Searcy

The Edge of Midnight, and all logos, characters, situations, artwork, and likenesses thereof are ™ and © 2007, Edge of Midnight Press. Used with permission by Studio 2 Publishing, all rights reserved. ISBN 0-9792455-0-8 EMP 1200 MSRP \$29.99

## PLAYTESTERS

Eric Aubrecht, Carl Ballard,  
Kevin Barbour, Tyler Blount,  
Eirik Bull-Hansen, Kyle Burckhard,  
Dave Cain, Ben Caplan,  
Jeff Churchill, David Crabbe,  
Steve Crow, Peter Blake Hindman,  
Laura Heilman, Sean Higgins,  
Sean Holland, Pat Kapera,  
Paul Lalumondier, George Lichter,  
Michelle Matusin, Christi McCray,  
Vivika McKie-Woods,  
Angus McNichol, Steve Mulhern,  
Clayton A. Oliver, Jason Olson,  
Kent Peet, Andrew Popovich,  
Justyn Pritchard, Jeff Rahn,  
Ben Riggs, Tarik Salameh,  
Marshall Smith, James Sparling,  
Chris Tang, Rodney Thompson,  
Seth Tupper, Rob Wieland,  
James R. Wiley, Marcus Wishick

## DEDICATION

To my three most generous  
partners in crime:

- Martin, who gave without asking again and again;
- Kevin, who gave because he didn't know I had the straight flush;
- Ree, who gave by sharing a cell with me for four years... and who kept giving in all the years since.

I'd knock over a bank with you  
guys any time.

### WARNING

This book contains adult  
themes and language. Reader  
discretion is advised.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## INTRODUCTION ..... 5

## CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN ..... 9

The Typical Con Artist	10
Types of Cons	12
Short Cons	13
Big Cons	16
Con Artist Roles	16
Crew Operation	19
Types of Big Con	20
Role-Playing the Con	25
Structure of the Con	25
PCs as Marks	26
PCs as Con Artists	27
Other Details	28
The Con Artist Campaign	30
Con Artists in Mixed Parties	30
Con Artists in the Unified Commonwealth	31
Con Artist NPC	32

## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS ..... 33

Types of Thieves	34
How to Steal: Thievery 101	36
Professionals	36
Amateurs	38
Types of Theft	39
Security Measures and Other Obstructions	44



Role-Playing Thieves	49
Motive	49
Thief Types	50
Theft-Based Scenarios and Campaigns	54
Thieves in Mixed Parties	58
Thief NPCs	59

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS ..... 61

What is Organized Crime?	62
Syndicate Structures	63
Mob Activities	63
Automobile Theft	64
Financial Scams	64
Gambling and Prostitution	65
Narcotics	66
Protection, Extortion, and Loan Sharking	67
Racketeering	68
Smuggling	70
Violence	71
Mob Culture	72
Ethnicity	73
Joining a Mob	73
Mob Rules	74
Political Connections	76
Rivals	76
Tongs and Triads	77
Organization and Traditions	78
Criminal Activities	80
Enemies and Rivals	81
Role-Playing Mobsters	82
Mobster Types	82

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Mobsters in Mixed Parties . . . . .	87
Romance vs. Reality . . . . .	88
The Mobster Campaign . . . . .	88
Classic Gangster Story Structure . . . . .	88
Turning It on Its Ear . . . . .	90
Conflicts From Without . . . . .	91
Conflicts From Within . . . . .	92
Mobster NPCs . . . . .	93

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES.....95

The Wanted and the Walled-in . . . . .	96
Fugitives . . . . .	96
Pursuers . . . . .	96
Life on the Lam . . . . .	101
Fugitive Player Characters . . . . .	104
The Fugitive Campaign . . . . .	104
Prisoners . . . . .	105
GUILTY! Trials and Convictions . . . . .	105
Life in the Big House . . . . .	107
Extracurricular Activities . . . . .	109
Who's Who in the Big House . . . . .	113
The Jailbird Campaign . . . . .	119
Prisoner and Fugitive NPCs . . . . .	120

## CHAPTER FIVE: GAUNT CHARACTERS.....123

Overview of Gaunt Culture . . . . .	124
Gaunts and Prejudice . . . . .	125

Gaunts and the Law . . . . .	127
Gaunts and Religion . . . . .	128
Catholicism . . . . .	128
Protest Atheism . . . . .	130
Other Religions . . . . .	131
Gaunt Culture and Lifestyle . . . . .	132
Gaunt NPCs . . . . .	140

## CHAPTER SIX: GAUNT CRIMINALS.....143

Motivation . . . . .	145
Types of Gaunt Criminal . . . . .	148
Street Gangs . . . . .	148
Gaunt Mobsters . . . . .	151
Gaunt Thieves and Robbers . . . . .	153
Gaunt Con Artists . . . . .	154
Gaunt Criminal NPCs . . . . .	155

## CHAPTER SEVEN: ROLE-PLAYING GAUNTS .....157

Role-Playing the Change . . . . .	158
Gaunts as Members of the Few . . . . .	160
Gaunts in Mixed Groups . . . . .	160
All-Gaunt Campaigns . . . . .	161
Using Gaunt NPCs In Your Campaign . . . . .	163
Gaunt Ally NPC . . . . .	165

## APPENDICES.....167

Crime and Punishment . . . . .	168
A Glossary of Criminal Terms . . . . .	169
New Rules . . . . .	173

# INTRODUCTION



<sup>TM</sup>No one gives it to you.  
You have to take it.

- Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson),  
*The Departed*

## INTRODUCTION

We all like to think of ourselves as law-abiding citizens: that we respect the accepted morality of the society in which we live, and that transgressions represent occasional lapses in judgment, not signs of an amoral character. Yet doing good, by its very nature, can be difficult. It demands sacrifices, it asks for unpleasant decisions, and while the rewards of a virtuous life are beyond count, they rarely have the more tangible benefits that the odd bit of wrongdoing can provide. Who among us hasn't swiped a candy bar every now and then, or kept quiet when the cashier inadvertently handed back more than we were due? And who among us hasn't had the occasional daydream about robbing a bank or pulling off a masterful art theft? Though most of us never act on such impulses — realizing the harm they cause and the harsh punishments they carry — it doesn't quite extinguish their dark allure.

Crime stories are in part an effort to express and understand those impulses. What makes a Michael Corleone or a Tony Montana? Why are good people sometimes driven to commit bad deeds? Is crime purely a social problem, alleviated through the elimination of poverty and want? Or is there something fundamentally destructive in our spirit, something that says crime will always exist as long as there are rules to break? *Noir* is redolent with meditations on the criminal mind: the urge to reject a corrupt and hypocritical culture, the weakness of giving in to a moment of temptation, the thrill of executing a carefully planned robbery, and the fatalistic certainty of capture or worse at the end of it all. Numerous touchstones of the genre focus on those who perpetrate illegal acts, from *Double Indemnity* and *Gun Crazy* through *The Godfather* all the way up to *Memento* and *The Usual Suspects*. In many ways, *noir* wouldn't exist without the allure of crime — without that cynical urge that feels so good to be bad.

Naturally, the Unified Commonwealth is rife with crime, from the calculated machinations of nation-spanning syndicates to the fevered desperation of hard luck schlubs. Like our own reality, the underworld here forms a culture all its own, complete with identifiable denizens and an unspoken code of conduct. The underworld is divided along class lines, much the same way its legitimate counterpart is. Criminals distinguish themselves through comparisons of wealth, power, reputation, and clout. It's similar to any other social unit, save that here, the morals and scruples of legitimate groups are long gone. The criminal class system is a Darwinian struggle of kill-or-be-killed, a savage conflict defined only by ruthlessness and survival instinct. Those unable to defend what they have accrued are driven out by leaner and hungrier rivals. Elder statesmen are rarities in the criminal world, and the pension plan is whatever you can save through a lifetime of hustling, filching, and brutalizing. Few criminals ever bask in the glow of retirement, though a lucky handful manage to get out with enough to live on for awhile. The rest are either reduced to impoverishes fugitives, imprisoned by the forces of law, or flat-out killed. Every career criminal knows that their life entails great risk, and that sooner or later, the odds will run out.

## LET'S ALL BE CLEAR ABOUT THIS

Crime and criminal endeavors are an important part of *noir*. By telling stories about criminals, we try to understand the motives that drive them and the tragedy which their acts embody. It can be illuminating to explore the dark side from time to time, and fun to indulge in a little iconoclastic mischief by playing romanticized outlaws within the confines of a game. But there is a huge difference between reality and make-believe... and everyone who opens this book is smart enough to know it. In the real world, the activities described here are neither romantic, nor cool, nor iconoclastic, nor fun. They destroy lives, destabilize society, and shed countless gallons of innocent blood. The perpetrators are vile, amoral men who profit from the suffering of others, and who often end up either locked in a tiny cell or dead by any number of gruesome means. We condemn such activities in the harshest possible terms, and trust that our readers can recognize the obvious distinction between telling a story at the gaming table, and engaging in any act of crime or violence away from it.

Within these draconian depths, none are so well attuned to thrive as the gaunts. Through a combination of physical gifts and social stigmata, they are almost ideally suited for criminal enterprises and their great strengths make them terrifying adversaries. In the few short decades since gauntism reared its ugly head, leatherbacks have risen to dominate both organized crime and more vicious acts of individual misanthropy. Denied other options, they have learned to thrive as outsiders, taking by force what an uncaring world will not give them. Yet despite their fearsome reputation, many gaunts defy the easy path of robbery and mayhem, striving to attain success through the few fleeting chances at legitimacy which society gives them. Their struggles are all the more difficult for the dark reputation engendered by their criminal brethren.

Yes, many gaunts choose to eschew the criminal world: to avoid the easy choices and to fight for greater equality using less destructive means. They have their work cut out for them, since the image of the criminal misanthrope is fixed in the public's mind (compounded by a relentless media fixation on leatherback wrong-doers). But most gaunts instinctively understand that the outlaw life is a devil's bargain, purchasing a few years of empty luxury at an incalculable cost to their fellow community... and likely ending in a hail of bullets before anything but a few measly dollars can be accumulated. They toe the hard road of the straight and narrow as best they can, striving to show the world that they are far better than their reputation suggests. And yet the weight of prejudice coupled with the stifling poverty of their surroundings means that even the most upstanding gaunt must grapple with the reality of crime. Whether they like it or not, they are linked to the underworld — those who resist it as much as those who embrace its call like they were born to it.



# INTRODUCTION

This book addresses the two worlds — overlapping and yet distinct — of the professional criminal and the misunderstood gaunt. Player characters in *Edge of Midnight* campaigns will invariably rub shoulders with both worlds... and more than a few will belong to those worlds themselves. The information presented herein will help players create characters with criminal backgrounds, as well as gaunts who both embody and defy the stereotypes to which society has shackled them. While designed for the world of *The Edge of Midnight*, many of the themes and ideas presented here can be used in any campaign with a modern or twentieth century setting. There is an emphasis on the particulars of the Commonwealth (as well as mention of how members of the Few function within the criminal class), but much of the information is culled from real-world sources and will function much the same in any game set in the same general era.

The first half of the book is devoted to criminals in general, focusing on four specific topics which have the most potential in a role-playing setting. The list of possible crimes is almost beyond counting, but these four encompass the right mixture

of structure, purpose, and popular imagery to fit into an *Edge of Midnight* campaign. More individualistic crimes — the murder of a cheating lover, for example, or a barroom assault — can easily be fleshed out by any GM without the need for guidance.

Chapter One, “Con Men,” explores the world of grifts and confidence games. It describes the various kinds of scams practiced by con artists in the mid-twentieth century, along with a breakdown of the con game’s structure, the various roles con artists play in pulling off a scheme, and the methods and equipment which con men use in their work. It also discusses how to develop campaigns based around parties of con artists, running con men in mixed parties, and portraying con men as members of the Few. It includes an essay on handling crimes of deception from a metagame perspective, and closes with a sample NPC for the GM to use as he sees fit.

Chapter Two, “Thieves and Robbers,” details that oldest and most time-honored of crimes: theft. It includes information on various different kinds of thieves, from petty purse snatchers to polished jewel thieves to armed robbers. It covers the



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

means by which thefts are planned and executed, and the various obstacles a thief may need to overcome in the course of his work. Fences and other means of disposing of the loot are handled in detail, as well as counterfeiting and forgery operations (which are essentially theft by other means). Finally, it include more information on running bands of thieves, thieves in mixed parties, and thieves as members of the Few, along with another pair of NPCs.

Chapter Three, "Mobsters," deals with organized crime. It covers the development and structure of crime syndicates, the codes of honor used to keep their membership in line, and the types of criminal enterprises which typify their operations. It also discusses the ways in which mobsters use legitimate methods to disguise their activities, such as laundering money and manipulating a given city's legal political apparatus. It covers the types of gangsters which appear in a given mob structure, and discusses ways to convey both the romanticized tragedy of organized crime, and the far more vile reality of life within the mob. More NPCs are included, as well as a discussion of mobster campaigns, alternate campaign ideas, and how organized criminals behave as members of the Few. It also includes a lengthy section on Asian Tongs — organized criminals whose activities mirror western mobs, but who have a culture and methodology that is uniquely their own.

Chapter Four, "Prisoners and Fugitives," covers the ramifications of what happens when a crime goes wrong. It is divided into two sections. The first discusses fugitives: characters on the run from any number of persecutors, and whose flight and search for safety comes to define their existence. The second and more detailed section handles what happens when a criminal is caught, from trials to prison sentences to the possibility of escape. Life inside prison is discussed in thorough (but moderately discreet) detail, and information on running a campaign set in prison is included for GMs so inclined. As with other chapters, it closes with a pair of NPCs to either include in a campaign, or to give players an idea of the sorts of characters which life on the lam can facilitate.

The last three chapters of the book devote themselves to coverage of gaunts, those misunderstood outcasts who often find themselves among society's criminals whether they wish

## WHO GETS TO READ WHAT?

While most of this book is intended for both players and GMs, some game masters may not wish their group to read certain sections. They may intend to spring an NPC or two on them, or plan a campaign around the guidelines detailed here, and wish to retain the element of surprise. In any case, players should check with their GMs before reading this book through, and GMs who want to hold certain sections in reserve should let their players know which pages are "off limits."

to be or not. Chapter Five, "Gaunt Characters," contains expanded information on the leatherbacks and their culture, including social structure, religious beliefs, and means of coping with prejudice both within and outside of their community. The achievements of gaunt athletes are covered, as well as other ways in which gaunts are making their mark without resorting to violence.

Chapter Six, "Gaunt Criminals," covers those leatherbacks who believe that they owe nothing to a society that rejects them. It traces the difference between gaunt criminals and their normal counterparts, highlights the tactics and motivation of leatherback lawbreakers, and emphasizes the unique abilities which gaunts can bring to any illegal endeavor.

Chapter Seven, "Role-Playing Gaunts," contains special information for players, allowing them to flesh out their gaunt characters, develop their unique motives and personalities, and integrate them into a potentially fractious party without compromising their nature.

As with the rest of this book, a brief slate of NPCs is included in each gaunt chapter, both as an example of the character types discussed therein, and as personalities for use in the GM's campaign.

Finally, the book concludes with a brief set of appendices, covering several section's worth of handy information. It includes a legal description of various crimes (and suggested punishments) a lexicon of underworld terminology, and a series of new backgrounds, advanced professions and other rules to help enhance your characters.

Whether hardened professionals or misunderstood minorities, the figures in this book represent the core of the U.C.'s underworld. In their hands, the dark promises of *The Edge of Midnight* remove their façade, reveling in the greed of untold riches and the bloody price which they exact. No one in the Commonwealth is immune to their lure, and only the toughest and most cunning can thrive and prosper once that line is crossed. Are your characters hard enough to do what it takes for wealth and glory? Or have they just had it with the lies and hypocrisy of "honest" society, and want to start playing by someone else's rules? Either way, it's a long and vicious ride — one where (to quote another traveler on that line) "the last stop is the cemetery." Whatever brings you there, you're going to need everything you have just to hang on. Turn the page, and find out if crime really doesn't pay.





# CHAPTER ONE CON MEN



™And then with the air of a guileless child,  
Oh that sweet bright smile and those eyes aflame,  
He said, 'If you'll let me, dear Mr. Wilde,  
I'll show you a ravishing little game.'

- The New York Tribune,  
January 1883

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## CON MEN

*The train ride to Central City was interesting; you wound up in a poker game with some shark from Terminus, and he took you for a little money. Not much really, but the loss was humiliating and hard to swallow. Most of the rest of the trip was spent in the smoking car, bemoaning your fate to a very sympathetic young man who listened appreciably for hours. The two of you hit it off quite well, and you found out that you both were taking the transfer train to Paradiso. He was a bit of a card player himself, and showed you several ways to read opponents, which he claimed had kept him on the winning side of more poker games than he could count.*

*During the stopover in Central City, the two of you wandered out into the thoroughfare to find some lunch. Along the way, you passed what appeared to be an illicit gambling parlor, operating quite brazenly in this city of gangsters. As you walked by the window, your friend stopped and pointed. "Wasn't that the slicker who beat you on the train?" Sure enough, the Terminus shark was sitting at a table, playing cards with a group of locals. Your friend leaned over conspiratorially and looked at you. "How would you like me to rake him over the coals for you? We've still got a few hours; by then I can take the shirt off his back." Impressed with his earlier displays of expertise, you agreed.*

*Unfortunately, your friend didn't have enough money for a reasonable stake. Almost apologetically, he asked if you could front him. Still stinging from your earlier humiliation, you happily handed him the contents of your wallet — almost \$600 — and watched him convert it into chips. You sauntered up to the bar, and ordered a drink as your friend went to work; you had to pretend to be alone, lest the shark think the two of you were in cahoots, but it was worth it. It soon became clear that your friend had the shark over a barrel. The pot kept growing and growing, and while the Terminus man kept eyeing you irritably, he never caught on that the player cleaning him out was conspiring with you to rob him.*

*During a quick meeting in the bathroom, the two of you plotted an exit strategy. Your friend said he had over \$2,000 in winnings, over and above your initial stake. All you had to do was leave separately, while he stayed and played a few more hands. You could meet back on the train and divide the winnings between you. Happy to have inflicted a little revenge and thrilled at the money you just made, you headed back to the station and boarded the train for Paradiso.*

*It wasn't until several hours later — hundreds of miles away and after a thorough search of every car — that you realized your friend wasn't on the train... and neither was your money.*

Welcome to the world of the confidence man.

"The aristocrat of criminals," as David W. Maurer put it, has long been a staple of crime stories. While other thieves take money by force, or through elaborately engineered designs of stealth, con artists don't have to take anyone's money. They fool their victims into giving it up willingly. As their title implies, they gain the confidence of their mark through deception or trickery, then entice him to hand over a sum of money

under false pretenses — often with the belief that he will make even more money. Then they vanish, dividing the profits with their cohorts before seeking out a new victim to fleece all over again.

Though their lives have been romanticized in books and fiction, most professional con artists are wretched individuals, living a lonely existence devoid of friendship or human bonds. The efforts they make to secure their money are as labor-intensive as those earned by honest men, and yet few people spend it quicker than they. Con artists are continually on the run, moving from city to city lest their faces get noticed or their marks catch up to them. They're predatory criminals, no less heartless than those who attain their ends through violence. And yet they often bilk those who are themselves corrupt, selling false promises of easy money to greedy souls willing to break the rules for their own benefit.

All of which makes them perfect characters for *The Edge of Midnight*.

## THE TYPICAL CON ARTIST

Con artists come in many permutations (as with any character type), but a few common traits predominate. Most con men are very intelligent (high Brains) and extremely charismatic (high Moxie score). At first glance, they seem very sociable and appear to enjoy other people's company. That's usually the best way to target marks. In their private lives, they are the exact opposite: solitary, reclusive, and reluctant to give up any information about their lives. In many ways, they appear as ciphers, able to take on a thousand different personae but exhibiting few real personality traits of their own. This often works to their advantage when being pursued; successful con men never draw unwanted attention to themselves. Physical abilities are not generally placed in high regard, nor are skills with weapons. If a fight breaks out, the con artist has already failed at his job; the best ones can ensure that no violence ever befalls them, regardless of circumstance.

Many con artists fell into the life early: penniless, coming from broken homes, and turning to the grift as a way of making ends meet. A few, however, have more legitimate origins: starting out in straight professions before bad luck or boredom turned their interests to crime. Some careers — particularly those in the sales industry — lend themselves naturally to confidence games, as do many "gray area" professions such as gambling or working at a track. But whether one enters into it through birth or choice, it instills in one a tremendous yearning for security and respect. Con artists carefully cultivate a respectable image, both among their peers and towards the marks upon whom they prey. They maintain a high standard of living and aspire to socialize with the best and the brightest. They dress well — at least the successful ones do — and they often maintain impeccable manners and ways of speaking. This partially comes from the need to groom wealthy marks, but also from a need for acceptance — a way of gaining the

## CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN

respect they feel they have lost (or indeed never possessed in the first place). They count themselves above the petty riff-raff who must use force to procure their funds. The confidence man is nothing if not self-assured: a belief in his own abilities helps prop up a deeply hidden lack of self-esteem.

But despite (or perhaps because of) their need for respect, most con artists eschew what they refer to as “the suckers’ life.” A 9-to-5 job holds no interest for them; they would rather die than be tied down, and getting what they want through ordinary (read: legal) channels is tantamount to laying down and dying. Most of them have enormous egos, considering

the rest of the world little more than gullible sheep. In their minds, they are above the system, too smart to play by its penny-ante rules and clever enough to convince it to give them what they want willingly. The fact that they must often work as hard or harder than those with legitimate jobs never occurs to them, and the lack of family or permanent bonds seems as much a release as a burden. For all their social aspirations, they remain loners at their core: like sharks, they’ll die if they stop moving, and must always be on the look out for the next scam.

They’re also extremely intelligent. Con artistry requires cleverness to plan and execute, and creativity to mask from the suspicious. Intelligence is also very important in roping marks, for a con artist must display extensive knowledge on any number of subjects. People tend to trust those who share their interests, and a con artist who can speak with authority about a mark’s hobby or other pastime will find his job a lot easier. Grifters also need keen powers of observation, along with the ability to infer important details from the tiniest clues. Sizing people up comes second nature to them, and most have powers of deductive reasoning that would impress the most stalwart police investigator.

Yet despite their obvious brainpower, they themselves can easily fall prey to other grifters. So secure are they in their self-confidence — belief in oneself is absolutely imperative to pulling off a successful con — that they rarely see the warning signs when someone else pulls the wool over their eyes. Their personal greed is enormous, and the profession’s desire for a fast buck means that they can often be played as easily as they themselves play others. Because they seldom invest their earnings or rely on banks (lest they attract unwanted attention from the authorities), they often carry a great deal of cash, which they spend like it’s going out of style. Many are prodigious gamblers, while others blow extravagant sums on women, cars, or simply maintaining an upper-crust lifestyle.

(Of course, that’s not to say that a con artist PC needs to be this way. The above description is only a basic template, which may be adhered to or departed from in any manner which the players wish.)

### THE MARK

No con can exist without a victim (or “mark”) to fleece. Popular impression holds that most marks are blithering idiots, too naïve or thickheaded to notice the obvious swindle. The truth, however, is that many marks are intelligent, sophisticated, and reasonably clever people who would never believe themselves capable of falling for a con artist’s ruse. They include successful businessmen, doctors, and other prominent professionals, most of whom would normally be considered above such trickery. Indeed, the most important skill in con artistry is the ability to convince those “who would never fall for it” to fall for it, and indeed the mark’s belief in his own infallibility often contributes to his downfall. Canny con artists know how to flatter this belief, which makes their job much easier. How do they accomplish this, exactly? There are several factors involved:



## 1) The more money, the better.

In the first place, wealthy or successful marks usually have more money to be taken. Lawyers or businessmen with fat checkbooks are much more profitable than a middle-class shoe salesman struggling with his mortgage. (For the bold con artist, wealthy gangsters fall into this category as well.) Such men rarely earned their money by making foolish decisions, and thus will not surrender their confidence without careful effort. On the other hand, it also makes them very sure of themselves, meaning that once they buy the con artist's patter, they're irretrievably hooked. Their own ego helps secure the con, for such a powerful and brilliant man could not possibly be fooled, could he?

## 2) Greed is good.

More intelligent and/or sophisticated marks are quick to see their own advantage in a con, which helps seal the deal. Most cons play upon the mark's greed or the promise of great reward. The faster a mark can spot a way of making money for himself, the more readily he will play into the con artist's scheme. Good con artists approach the mark with opportunities only a fool will turn down — or better yet, present the hook in such a way that the mark himself suggests the very plan which the grifter had in mind all along. That way, the con artist can appear reluctant and hesitant while the mark presses forward eagerly, his own enthusiasm setting him up for the fall.

## 3) Image is everything.

Finally, intelligent or successful marks often have a reputation to protect, which means they are much more likely to keep quiet once they are taken. Often, the promise of money comes with complicity, inviting the mark to participate in something illegal or dishonest in order to gain financial advantage. Once his interest is excited, he will likely brush aside legal considerations... until the con plays out and he stands to be implicated in such action. Not only will it keep the mark quiet during the con (preventing him from mentioning it to his spouse, friends, or associates), but it will make him extremely reluctant to take the matter up with the police for fear of being implicated himself.

Even if legality is not an issue, pride often comes into play; a mark convinced of his own infallibility will be ashamed when he realizes that he's been taken, and keep the affair to himself. Or — in some of the most successful cons — he's unaware that he's been fleeced and chalks the entire experience up to bad luck. Even then, he'll be reluctant to speak of the matter, since it indicates a failing on his part. As a result, most successful cons go unreported, and indeed one of the keys to a good confidence game is preventing the mark from ever relating what has occurred.

Naturally, anyone can make a potential mark, and con artists need not differentiate based on any one particular factor. But if they have a choice, they much prefer their marks to be fat, rich, and easy to bilk... and a blind assumption that one is "too smart" to be taken often makes it that much easier.

## TYPES OF CONS

No two cons are ever quite the same, but all of them follow a singular basic structure (which is dealt with in detail under "Structure of the Con" on page 25) and all of them fall into one of two basic categories. The first, short cons, are quick and relatively easy to engineer, while the second, big cons, are much more complex, but usually produce a lot more money. Both types contain an infinite number of permutations, and are as varied as the hucksters who practice them. A basic run-down of each kind is detailed below.

### MOVING AROUND

Con artists are notoriously light footed, and the circumstances of the con almost always lend themselves to travel. The grifter who finds his surroundings growing too familiar is apt to move along quickly. Cops begin to recognize him, rivals know his face, and shopkeepers catch on to his shenanigans. A new locale, with fresh faces and different marks to fleece, can make all the difference to a con artist tired of looking over his shoulder. Many even work "circuits," operating in a large city for several months before picking up stakes and moving on, then returning to that city a year or two later, when their faces have been forgotten.

Not only does the practice keep the grifter ahead of trouble, it prevents him from wasting unnecessary energy competing for space with a larger or better-funded operation. Permanent confidence operations must invariably pay protection to the local crime lord or else find themselves constantly harassed by police. Neither option sits well for con artists as a general rule, since they prefer the freedom and independence of their lifestyle.

The same principle applies when finding a victim to swindle. Travelers make natural marks for con artists, especially in the era of *The Edge of Midnight*. With intra-continental flights a long and laborious process, most traveling is done by train or boat, which leaves plenty of time to get acquainted with one's fellow travelers. Alone and in strange surroundings, people readily respond to a smile or a friendly face.

Many travelers also tend to be more adventuresome away from home: more willing to take a chance on a new experience. And when it's all said and done, the mark is on his way to his destination and out of the grifter's hair, thus minimizing any chance for an uncomfortable encounter later on. Such benefits vastly outweigh the natural wariness and suspicion that comes from being out of one's element, and grifters can make a reliable living simply by plying victims along the nation's rail and shipping lines.



# CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN

## SHORT CONS

Short cons represent those which involve taking the mark immediately, rather than grooming him for a bigger pay-off. They don't normally net huge returns, but they have the advantage of involving little preparation and can target nearly anyone who looks prosperous enough. If it goes bad, little is lost, and the trouble isn't so great that it can't be outrun. Short cons can be inserted as brief encounters into any game featuring an appropriate character. PCs can use it as an easy way to make a little money, while GMs can turn a short-con encounter into a hook for a longer scenario. (Few things are more motivating than an angry mark out for revenge or a swindled knickknack with big strings attached.)

Many short cons involve gambling, which has several advantages. Card games, dice games, and pool matches are by their very nature brief and simple, usually demanding only one or two grifters in on the take. Sleight of hand tricks are the order of the day, and since gambling as a whole is illegal in most parts of the U.C., anyone complaining about it will implicate themselves by default.

Similarly, circuses and carnivals are potent breeding grounds for the short con. With their regular traveling schedule and huckster's sales tactics, it's very easy to slip a few crooked swindles in with more legitimate attractions. Though they eschew big towns (where straight circuses can play to huge acclaim), the smaller villages in rural areas are often hungry for a little entertainment, making them ready marks for a grifter's craft. Using the short con means that a grifter can pack up and leave with the rest of the carny once the mark is taken, and an operation with many performers offers safety in numbers... provided the manager gets a cut of the take, of course.

## SHORT CON MECHANICS

Most short cons should be resolved with a contested skill roll (the con artist's Smoothness + Slight of Hand, or Moxie + Fast Talk — whichever is most appropriate — contested against the mark's Gut + Perception). If the con artist succeeds, the con is imperceptible, and the mark will not realize he has been swindled until long after the grifter is gone. If the mark succeeds, the ruse is detected, and the mark may pummel the would-be swindler as he sees fit. A partial success on the part of the con artist means that the con has succeeded, but that the mark is suspicious and the grifter must leave immediately before trouble starts. If the mark achieves a partial success, he's handed over his money, but almost instantly recognizes his mistake and may now confront the con artist before the rascal has a chance to flee.

While the skill roll is useful in determining the outcome of a con (since the player and GM are likely both aware of it), the encounter should be role-played out in as much detail as possible, so as better to convey the flavor of the con in question.

Most con artists begin their careers practicing the short con before moving on to larger and more elaborate schemes, and have few problems going back when times grow lean. Short cons can often be attempted on the spur of the moment, requiring only a bare minimum of props and no more than one or two partners at the most. Below is a list of typical short cons, which most self-respecting grifters know and have practiced at some point in their lives.

### The Big Mitt

Also known as the "duke" (which posits the same con onboard a train or passenger ship), the big mitt involves three con artists, all skilled card players. A mark or a small group of marks is enticed into a card game. Usually, the game starts out with low stakes, but soon escalates into something larger. The chosen mark is allowed to win a hand or two, with the pot growing by succession, until the time comes for him to deal. When he asks one of the grifters to cut the cards, the deck is surreptitiously replaced with a stacked duplicate. The mark receives an almost unbeatable hand (say, four kings), and immediately bets the farm... only to be defeated by an even bigger hand (say, a straight flush) in the hands of one of the grifters.

The movie *Honeymoon in Vegas* features a strong example of the big mitt.

### The Bilk

The bilk is a simple con relying upon sleight-of-hand and used when paying for a service. The con artist places the money in an envelope while ensuring that the victim is watching. The envelope has a slit in it which the con artist uses to surreptitiously slide the money out. He then hands the empty envelope over, trusting the mark to pocket it without realizing that there's no money inside.

The movie *House of Games* includes a good demonstration of the bilk.

### The Cross

The cross requires two grifters to work properly. The first, having gained the confidence of the mark, demonstrates his prowess at a particular game. He then induces the mark to bet on him against the second grifter, an apparent stranger, who also appears skilled. If played properly, the mark will be eager to wager, convinced that his "friend" cannot lose. Of course, the second grifter prevails (usually just barely, depending on how skillfully the two engineer the "match"); once the mark is brushed off, the two split the pot.

The movie *White Men Can't Jump* features a strong example of the cross.





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## The Double Trays

This con involves convincing the mark to help rip off a gambling parlor. The grifter has a pair of loaded dice, which he assures the mark (through demonstration or otherwise) cannot lose. But he needs someone to play them, since he is well known in this gambling parlor and will be detected if he tries. Once the mark agrees to be the stand-in, the loaded dice are switched for a second pair — one guaranteed to lose — and the mark is allowed to blow his money betting on the mislabeled dice.

## The Fake

The fake entails a false bill or other enticement placed within a cheap item for sale. The mark will then pay an exorbitant rate for it, thinking it is worth much more than it is. For instance, a newspaper vendor will tuck a fake twenty dollar bill inside of the latest edition, and then sell it for two dollars. The mark will happily buy it, thinking that he's getting the better end of the deal, only to find out that the bill is false. The vendor can always deny knowing anything about it, and the mark rarely complains since he would basically admit to trying to rip the vendor off himself.

## The Flat Joint

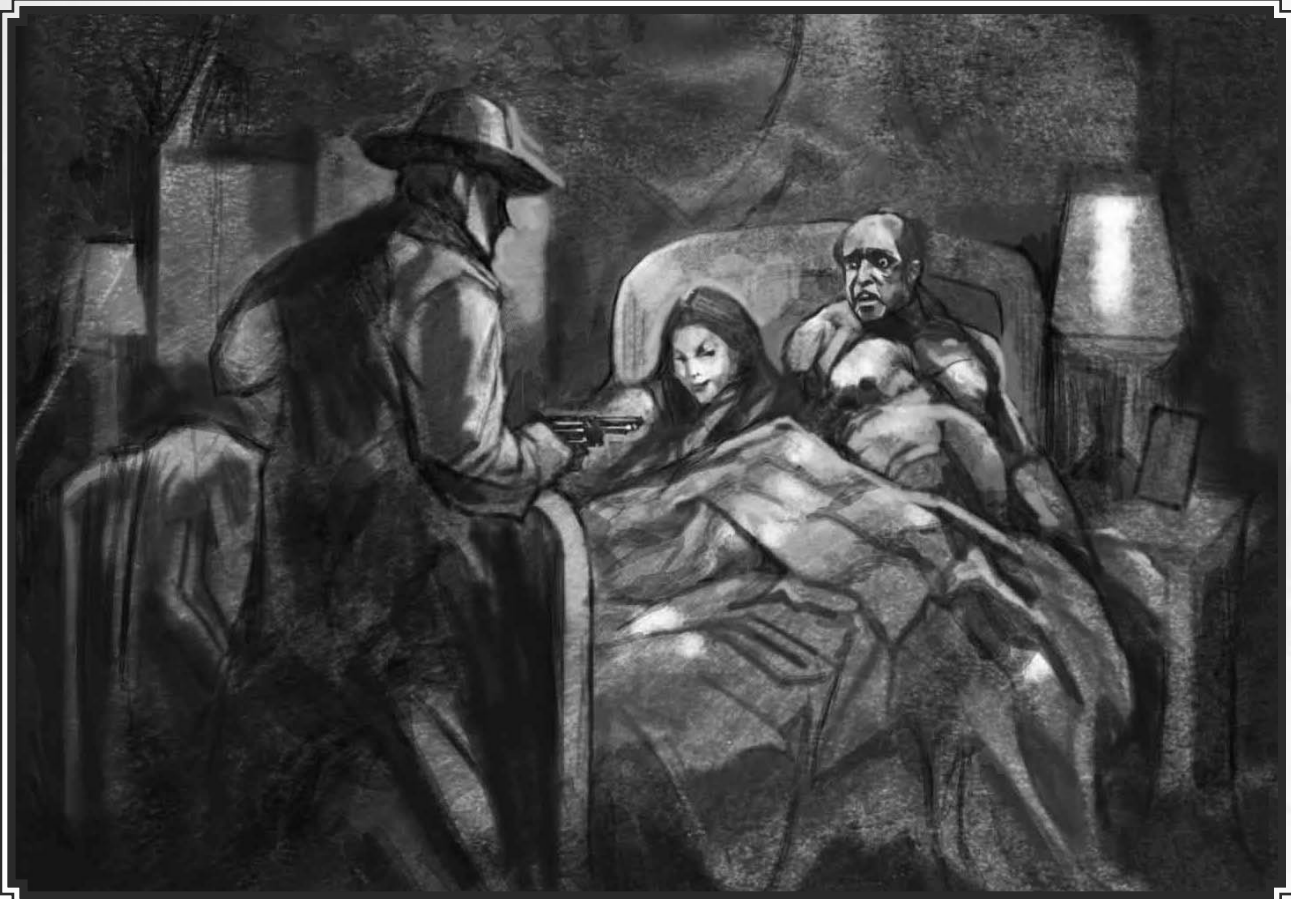
The flat joint is simply a crooked gambling device, such as a fixed roulette wheel or the like. It can be completely controlled by the operator and used to generate any outcome

he or she wishes. They are normally used in circuses or traveling carnivals — “wheels of fortune” are quite popular there — though a few lower-end gambling parlors will make use of them as well.

## The Gangster's Girl

Most self-respecting grifters stay away from this ruse, but it still sees a lot of action from the second-raters, and will always work as long as men lust after pretty girls. The mark is targeted in a bar and sized up by an attractive woman — one half of the confidence team. She flirts with the mark until she arouses his interest and eventually suggests that they retire to a room nearby which she knows. Then, when the mark is undressed and thinking about anything but a threat, the second half of the team enters — shouting loudly, brandishing a weapon and demanding that the mark get away from “his” girl. The mark usually departs the premises as quickly as possible... often without his pants and wallet.

Cruder variations involve the “gangster” extorting the money rather than trusting the mark to flee, while more cunning variations include a fake stabbing, where the “gangster” appears to murder his “girl.” He splatters her with fake blood hidden up his sleeve, then waves the knife around as if to take out the mark next. The sight of his would-be one-night stand bleeding to death on the floor is enough to send the mark out of the room as fast as his shoeless feet can carry him.



# CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN

## The Lost Ring

The lost ring requires two grifters and a cheap knickknack (usually a ring or other piece of jewelry) which can pass as expensive to a casual inspection. One grifter will enter a shop or store — preferably one staffed by just a single cashier — and ask if anyone has found the knickknack there. He claims it's very valuable, and that he lost it earlier in the day. He will thoroughly search the store, and when it isn't found, becomes visibly upset. He leaves a phone number or puts up a sign, and promises a reward of several hundred dollars if anyone finds it.

A few hours later, the second grifter arrives at the store with the knickknack, claiming that he had found it nearby. The cashier then calls the number (usually a public phone booth) and gets the first grifter on the line. He claims that he can drive over with the reward, but that it will take some time to get there. The second grifter claims he cannot wait — he's just passing through and isn't local — which creates a quandary. One of the two con artists then suggests that the cashier hold onto the knickknack and advance half of the reward to the "finder" — either from his own pocket or from the cash register. The "owner" could then arrive and pay the full reward, thus doubling the cashier's money.

Of course, once the money is paid, the "owner" never arrives to claim the knickknack... which turns out to be a worthless fake.

## The Pigeon Drop

One of the oldest and most respected cons in the business, the pigeon drop is a pure and simple example of how to fleece a mark: flash money in front of him, arrange for a deceptive trade, and then blow him off. One con artist will size up the mark by approaching him in casual conversation. While gaining the victim's trust, he ascertains how much money the man has readily accessible. Once the con artist knows, the next part of the con is unleashed. A second grifter approaches, seemingly at random, and together the three "stumble" upon a large amount of money (in a briefcase or the like). The owner is nowhere to be seen and judging by the looks of it, the cash likely has some illicit origins. They agree to split the money three ways. The second grifter claims that his boss is a financier, and can launder the money without any problems.

Now the con comes into play. The second grifter goes off to see his "boss," while first grifter further cements his trust with the mark, positing them as "partners" and confidants. The second grifter comes back with news: his boss will launder the money, but he wants a share of the profits, and he demands a "good faith" payment from all of them in exchange for the risk he's taking. The mark ponies up the bread from his own pocket (along with the other two), and the second grifter goes off to tell his boss... only to return and inform them that they need to see the boss themselves, to sign a paper or the like. The first grifter agrees to watch the second, to make sure he's playing on the level, while the mark goes to see the "boss." When he arrives at the directed location, there's nothing but an empty office building (or perhaps a building for another company). When he comes back, he finds both grifters have vanished, along with any money he handed over.

The movie *House of Games* features a strong example of the pigeon drop.

## The Short Change

This absurdly simple con works against bartenders and cashiers at take-out restaurants. The con artist flashes a twenty dollar bill and makes a small order. Then, when the serviceman's back is turned, he switches the twenty for a five. The serviceman delivers the order and takes the bill... then makes change for a twenty instead of a five. Top-notch con men disdain such tactics as petty, but the sheer simplicity of the grift (and relative ease of escape should things go wrong) means that it will never go out of style.

The movies *The Grifters* and *Paper Moon* both feature strong examples of the short change.

## The Smack

The smack is a very popular con, an example of which appeared in the introduction to this section. Two con men are required, one of whom ingratiates himself to the mark before the con. Once he has the victim's confidence, the two are approached by the second con man, and a game is proposed — cards, pitching pennies, or the like. The first grifter entices the mark to help him fleece this "rube" and asks for a sum of money in order to seal the deal. The mark complies, convinced that his new friend can win a great deal with it. In order to avoid suspicion, the two must separate lest the "rube" catch onto their play. Once out of the mark's sight, of course, the grifter simply departs with the money and splits the pot with the "rube." Many large cons use more complicated versions of the smack as their key deception.

## The Tat

Another fundamental con, the tat's strength comes from the fact that — if played properly — the mark has no idea that he's been swindled. The basic version involves a die, planted in a bar or similar location. After chatting with the mark and establishing a rapport, the grifter "discovers" the die. He soon offers a game with it, something simple and uncomplicated. The loser will buy rounds (or offer cigarettes, or the like) to the winner. The con artist allows himself to be taken often enough to alleviate suspicions (a tactic referred to as a "cop and blow"). Then the stakes begin to escalate: the grifter suggests betting for money to make things more interesting, and the mark agrees. A good con artist has mastered die-rolling to the point where he can get any number he chooses to come up whenever he wishes. In this manner, he gradually fleeces as much as he can from the mark, losing just often enough to alleviate suspicion and allowing the mark to win often enough to keep up his interest. The best hustlers can keep a mark going for hours in this fashion, taking hundreds of dollars and leaving the victim with the mistaken impression that he lost it in a simple string of bad luck.

The movie *The Grifters* features a strong example of the tat.

## The Tear-Up

This is technically a form of blow off, where the mark's money has been taken and he must now be fobbed off without raising a stink. The mark is induced to put up his money in check form — usually during a card game or another form

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

of gambling — which eliminates the possibility of welshing if (when) he loses. The con artist feigns pity, and offers to tear up the check... which has been replaced with a similar-looking, but blank check (the pertinent grifter usually carries a wide variety of check types which he can match to the mark's). The mark relaxes when the check is torn up, not knowing that it's blank and worthless, and that the grifter still has the one he initially wrote. The ruse only becomes apparent when the mark's bank statement arrives, and the man who swindled him is long gone.

## The Twenties

The twenties is a more sophisticated variation of the short change, practiced mainly against shopkeepers. The con artist pays for an incidental purchase with an uncomfortably large bill, forcing the shopkeeper to make change. Then, as the change is being counted out, the grifter suddenly "realizes" that he has exact change and asks for his original bill back... along with the change being counted out. The con relies upon the shopkeeper being too harried and confused to realize that he's giving out extra money, which usually requires timing and a good sense of the surrounding activity from the grifter.

The movie *Nine Queens* features a strong example of the twenties.

## The Wipe

The wipe is a very simple and quick con, requiring one grifter. He approaches the mark with a request to guard a sum of money for safekeeping. They agree and the con artist places the money in a tied parcel (often a handkerchief). Then, in some manner, the mark is persuaded to put up an identical amount of matching funds (a "show of good faith" or the like). They go to the bank, and open the parcel, finding the money still there. The con artist adds the mark's money to the bundle and admonishes him to hide it and tell no one. They will divide the funds once they are together again. He then gives the parcel back to him... only it's not the parcel with the money. It's an identical parcel filled with paper or newspaper clippings. The mark hides it until greed or curiosity overwhelms him, only to find he's been duped, and the con artist is long-gone.

The movie *The Sting* features a strong example of the wipe.

## BIG CONS

Big cons are much more elaborate than their short-con cousins, and involve far larger sums of money. The term "confidence" takes on added importance, as the grifters involved must first bring the mark into their fold, and then get him to entrust them with significant funds — more than he would normally carry with him. He won't do that unless he trusts the con artists completely... far more than a chance encounter in a bar or train station. As with other cons, the mark's own greed helps the grifters do their job; as the dollar signs start building, he grows more and more eager to believe the lies they're feeding him.

## HE HAD IT COMING

"He deserved it," is a commoner grifter justification for a con. If their marks weren't greedy or selfish or eager to prove a point, they never would have been taken. The adage that you can't cheat an honest man isn't lost on practitioners of the con, and most use it as the blanket excuse to explain away their sins. Players wishing to portray con artists in a more positive light can take the principle one step further, acting as a sort of Robin Hood and taking money only from those who truly don't deserve it. *The Edge of Midnight* has plenty of unscrupulous businessmen, greedy bankers, and corpulent mob bosses who can easily stand to have their wallets lightened. Even other con artists can make interesting marks, ripe for a taste of their own medicine. The most popular grifter tales embrace this romanticized notion of con artistry, and there's no reason it can't be included in an *Edge of Midnight* campaign.

However, there's a very thin line between targeting the truly wicked, and targeting everyone on the *assumption* that they're wicked... especially in a place as compromised as the U.C. The GM can get a great deal of mileage out of playing up that distinction, especially with con artist PCs who consider themselves on the side of the angels. Is that sweet widow really an iron-fisted dragon to her staff? Is that evil-seeming banker just being harsh because he has mortgages to protect? A con artist who tries to separate the deserving from the undeserving could be making an egregious mistake, and either bilk an essentially honest soul... or worse, let a real bastard off the hook.

The basis of all big cons is the notion of an investment. The mark is giving up his money (or something else of value: knowledge, rare artifacts, gems and jewelry, etc.) in anticipation of receiving a great deal more money in return. The con itself encompasses two halves: the circumstances under which the mark is induced to hand over his cash and the engineered reason why his expected return never materializes (sometimes, that's as simple as the con men cutting and running, but the good ones are a little smoother than that). The structure of those two halves constitutes the meat of the big con, and requires certain specific roles to play. (More information on a con's structure can be found under "Role-playing the Con" on page 25.)

## CON ARTIST ROLES

While most small cons entail only one grifter (or at most two or three), a big con can involve dozens. In order to sell the illusion to the mark, many people must be in on the take — both the con artists themselves and minor figures whom they task or pay off. Every grift varies, but most big ones involve a specific set of roles which must all work in conjunction if the con is to come off. The organization is similar to that of

## CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN

a typical role-playing party — individual skills combined to facilitate a larger goal — and as such will come second nature to most experienced gamers. The different types of roles in a big con (and several smaller ones as well) are broken down below, along with a brief description of the traits and characteristics required by each.

### The Roper

Sometimes known as the “outside man,” the roper is charged with selecting the mark and securing his confidence. Sometimes, several ropers are employed in the service of one con, hoping to hook a large variety of marks. They often travel far and wide, riding the rail lines and the like in search of their prey. In some ways, they are not unlike private detectives: seeking clues, creating profiles, and learning everything they can about their prospective marks. In short cons, the roper usually acts quickly, going on gut instinct and what few clues he can glean on the fly. For big cons, the mark is more carefully selected, usually for the right combination of money, greed, and gullibility. (Role-playing scenarios may entail the selection of a unique mark, culled for the purposes of revenge or similar player character motivations.) But whatever con is in effect, it’s up to the roper to set the proper bait. He must know who is a good mark, and who might cause trouble. He must observe the mark’s habits, find his weaknesses, and determine the best con to play against him. He must know the mark as well as he possibly can, for the roper is more responsible than anyone else for securing his confidence.

Hooking a mark once he’s been selected is an even more arduous process. The roper must insinuate himself with the victim, setting the man’s mind at ease and convincing him that the roper is likable and trustworthy. The mark mustn’t think that the roper is smarter or more clever than he, nor can he get even the slightest whiff of ulterior motive. Often, the roper must express interest in a topic which the mark holds dear, to better establish a common rapport with him. Sometimes, it takes no more than buying him a few drinks, though most ropers rarely have it so easy.

Once the mark is on the hook, the roper must lead him into the scenario cooked up by the con artists and keep watch over him to make sure he stays with it. When the time is right, he must introduce the mark to the inside man (see right) and help propose the “investment.” He must also prevent any outsiders (the police, the mark’s relatives, etc.) from entering the picture. At this point, the mark is aware of the “investment” he must make, and often has thousands of questions about it. The roper must answer them all in a manner that both maintains the mark’s interest and allays any suspicions.



It’s an exhausting process, and often dangerous as well. One slip-up or perceived lie could blow weeks of work, and an angered mark could easily get the police involved. The pressure starts even before that, since the roper is the one out on the edges of the crew. To secure the mark, he must often leave the city in which he is based, away from his partners and the protection of any criminal mob or corrupt lawmen which may be on the take. He is subject to shakedowns from local police, NLEB agents, railroad detectives, and anyone else who spots his game. If trouble comes, he rarely has anyone to turn to, and as the mark’s primary point of reference, he can be easily fingered if things go sour.

Despite this, most ropers find they love their job. The thrill of danger — the excitement of operating “without a net” — gets into their blood, leaving them eager to embark upon whatever new scheme is afoot. And they love the sense of control they have over the marks: the feeling of getting victims to dance to whatever tune is required, and to heighten or assuage their fears as the situation merits. Though inside men are safer and usually get a larger piece of the take, the roper holds the real key to any successful con.

A roper must possess high social skills and an exceeding amount of charisma (Moxie) in order to do his job. Many are also quite dexterous, and good at disappearing when trouble comes calling. Most of them are jacks of all trades, possessing a little knowledge in a wide variety of areas, rather than a lot of knowledge in just one or two. Above all, they must have patience and willpower, for only by maintaining a mark’s confidence over a sustained period will the con finally come to fruition.

### The Inside Man

If the roper is the fishing hook, dangling his bait for the mark to bite, then the inside man is the reel: the powerful fulcrum that pulls him in. The inside man controls the operation, maintaining its headquarters and coordinating the various elements of the con. He makes sure local cops and politicians are paid off, keeps contact with the ropers to monitor their progress, and when the time is right, engineers the taking of the mark’s money. He also serves as the crew’s accountant (such as it is), and arranges for both the up-front expenses and any incidental fees (such as bail money) incurred during the job. When the mark has been fleeced, the inside man divvies up the money and makes sure every member of the crew is satisfied.

Those are mostly incidental duties, however. The inside man’s real job begins once the roper has a mark. He meets briefly with the two and sizes the victim up, determining if they have the resources to properly take his money. If they do, then the inside man “transfers” the victim’s confidence to himself from the roper, laying out the “opportunity” for the mark to take. He sells the get-rich-quick scheme, flashes the money the mark will get his hands on, or the like. He then leaves the mark in the care of the roper, and contacts the other members of the crew to set up the big play. In many ways the inside man serves as the con’s director, orchestrating events in order



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

to ensure that the mark's money is taken and that the crew gets away clean. He delivers instructions to the minor players, pays for the furnishings of any stores or false fronts involved (see page 24), and makes sure the roper has the protection he needs to keep the mark on the hook.

When the con finally comes into play, the inside man is the central performer, inducing the mark to give up his money, and then coordinating the "blow off" that gets rid of him with a minimum of fuss. It is here where the inside man really earns his keep, for he can manipulate the mark to surrender the money and depart without even being aware that a con has been played. Without the inside man's valuable expertise, the roper has nowhere to lead his victim, and the song-and-dance which produces the pay-off has no driving rhythm.

Inside men are the most organized of con artists, with a knack for planning and an eye for the little details. They assume a natural leadership position within the crew, and hold the group together during the often-stressful periods when the con is hanging in the balance. When the time comes, they must be excellent actors as well, manipulating the mark even more deeply than the roper does. Finally, they must serve as the intermediary between the crew and other elements which may interfere with the con — usually local police and organized crime. Most big-time con artists operate under mob protection, and the inside man makes sure the local Don or capo receives his pay-off. Similarly, the police and political influences must be neutralized, either by ensuring that they're unaware of any illicit activity or paying them to look the other way. The inside man's regular association with powerful figures requires a strong personality and a cool head, able to keep difficult situations from interfering with the crew's operation. Small wonder, then, that the inside man receives the lion's share of the take when the mark is finally fleeced.

## The Manager

Most big cons require "stores" — false fronts where the con is perpetrated and the mark is led to believe some great and exciting event is taking place. It may, for example, be a phony gambling den where high rollers come to place their bets, or the offices of a large company which the mark is led to believe can make him a quick fortune. It all depends on the nature of the con... but whatever its nature, it needs a manager to make it look authentic. The manager is the con's props department and set decorator; he furnishes the backdrop against which his fellow crew members play. He secures the location, oversees its outfitting, and provides all of the dressing it may require

to look authentic. When the con is over, he must oversee the teardown, making sure that there's nothing left but empty space for investigators to discover. (See the sidebar on page 24 for more on the big store.)

In addition, the manager also procures any props or outfits which the con artists themselves may require. The list is almost endless: train tickets, teletype machines, police badges, false checks or banking bonds, luxury automobiles, fake newspaper clippings, university diplomas, letter heads of all varieties, firearms, uniforms, and money. Money is often the most important part of a con, for nothing piques a victim's inherent greed (and thus his willingness to go along with the con) like the sight of a briefcase full of cash. All of these items must be acquired by the manager, and kept track of for the length of the con.

Much of the time, the job is very routine — like a storekeeper opening and closing his shop — but the sheer variety of items required by a good crew means that the manager is always on the lookout for something new. Experienced managers in established crews often have much of what they need already, but more transitory ones must often acquire things on the fly... and there's always a rare item or two which must be obtained before the deception can move forward. Forgeries can often do in a pinch, but the more authenticity an object has, the better. In order to obtain the right props, managers can put themselves in very tricky situations... such as sneaking into a police station to obtain a sergeant's uniform, or bargaining with a wanted warlock for a copy of one of his books. Money, too, can be difficult to obtain, and while the old trick of sandwiching one-dollar bills between a few twenties or fifties can help stretch the budget, big cons still require an impressive display. The inside man tallies it, but it's the manager's job to make sure it stays where it's supposed to... and gets it back to its proper owner when the con is completed.

Consequently, many managers are first-rate thieves, able to filch items out of the most secure locations. Good dexterity (along with a knack for stealthy movement) comes naturally to them, and they are also strong planners and organizers. They can coordinate numerous underlings in the building or disassembling of a set, creating and destroying various façades with breathtaking speed. They collect things with a magpie's voracity, storing props in hidden trunks and warehouses for use in a later con. Many are also excellent forgers, able to falsify identification papers, bank notes, or even individual signatures depending upon the need. Forgery can serve as an excellent source of income in between big cons, as well as exposing the manager to different letterheads, check types, and other forms of paperwork which may prove invaluable on a future con.

## The Tailer

A tailer is sort of an auxiliary babysitter, following the mark when the roper or inside man can't. He keeps tabs on the victim's whereabouts, notes the places he goes and the people he sees, and reports anything unusual back to the inside man. Tailers also serve as de facto bodyguards — especially when the mark has obtained the money, but not yet delivered it to





## CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN

the inside man. (It wouldn't do to let some anonymous mugger or street thief make off with the con artists' hard-earned pay-off!) Many crews use more than one taylor, who follow the mark in rotating shifts to prevent him from becoming suspicious.

When not serving in their primary function, tailors act as lookouts and guards, keeping an eye out not only for the mark, but also for any intrusive cops or rival criminals looking to wreck the con. They can quickly raise a hue and cry if trouble arrives, and are expected to take care of it themselves if it involves the mark.

Tailors are naturally very good at following people discreetly, but they also can be burly and intimidating if the situation calls for it. They make good wheelmen too, since tracking a mark sometimes calls for automobile use. Of all the con artist roles, the tailor is most likely to be armed, and may be employed during the con itself if gunplay or fisticuffs are called for. They usually have the inside man's phone number memorized and can call in extra help if the situation merits. The good ones make a habit of memorizing all the phone booth locations in a given area and a few have even experimented with surplus walkie-talkies in an effort to keep their compatriots informed.

### The Shill

Shills are often little more than moving scenery. They fill out the façade crafted by the manager: appearing as prosperous gamblers at a fake racing parlor, for example, or secretaries at a phony law firm. They are sometimes used in building or teardown operations (especially when time is a factor), and may serve other minor clerical duties as well. Otherwise, they are the incidental players in the big con.

Most shills are recruited on the fly and given only a short time to acclimate themselves to the con (the fewer people involved, the easier it is to keep the con a secret). Many are grifters in their own right who are between jobs, or are willing to help out a friend in exchange for a small cut of the take. They often have several "characters" which they can play, depending upon the exact nature of the con. The inside man or manager instructs them how to behave, and they simply go about their appointed task, selling the false front as best they can and otherwise endeavoring to stay out of the way. Shills are rarely a permanent part of the crew, but come and go depending upon what other jobs they have going.

Most of the time in a role-playing session, shills will be played by NPCs; their roles are too minor to be populated by player characters or their adversaries. Once in a while, however, a PC may take on the role of a shill — either to earn a little extra money, or as part of a larger storyline which the GM is planning.

### The Fixer

Technically, the fixer isn't part of any crew; he merely helps to facilitate them. He's usually the owner of a bar or pool hall: some legal profession that keeps the police from looking too closely. Every city has some place where con artists congregate — safe refuge to talk among themselves, compare battle

scars, and speak about their work in the open without drawing the ire of an innocent bartender. Fixers run such locations and don't strictly belong to the con artist community, permitting them to take a neutral position. However, such a position implicitly entails certain duties vital to any big con operation.

Foremost among these is communication conduit. Con artists looking to find each other often leave messages with the fixer, who dutifully relays them when the pertinent party comes in. In this manner, he can be used to help assemble a crew, or provide shills on the fly when a big con is going down. He also serves as a point of contact, allowing any member of the crew to contact the roper or inside man simply by going to the fixer and conveying the message. Finally, a fixer's place often provides protection for longtime con men — a place where they can go if the grift falls apart, or if they need someplace to lie low. The fixer often has contacts with local mob and law enforcement officials, and can deflect them when harboring a grifter on the run. Most fixers are good at keeping their ears open and their mouths shut; they tend to be skilled with a baseball bat or other implements of civil order, but their only other required trait is possession of a locale where grifters can meet and a willingness to lend a hand in exchange for a quiet pay-off.

## CREW OPERATION

Like any social network, a con artist crew has to operate smoothly if they hope to get anything accomplished. Ropers and inside men generally serve in the senior positions — planning the con and playing the largest role in order to pull it off. Managers and shills handle the little details while tailors are on hand to make sure things don't get ugly. The hierarchy of leadership is directly proportional to the amount of work involved: those who make the most effort usually enjoy the biggest share of the pay-off, and consequently call the shots when the time comes to make decisions. The rest are content to relax, play their parts, and collect some easy money at the end of the day.

If the con is to be completed successfully, the entire crew needs to trust each other. Consequently, they place a great deal of stake in one another's ethics... to an extent. Double-crossers are dealt with harshly, especially if it means losing the mark, and those with a habit of looking out for themselves often end up shunned by other con artists. On the other hand, grifters who come to trust each other will often work together for long stretches of time, relying on each other rather than take a chance with someone new. The best crews thus tend to coalesce into a permanent unit, working cons exclusively with each other and letting the rest of the community fend for itself. Such groups often have permanent "headquarters" or places to meet: a bar or pool hall run by a trustworthy fixer, with a few back rooms reserved for only themselves.

The honor system works strangely among con artists. In some circumstances, camaraderie is quite strong, with grifters standing by each other in a crisis. Few con artists ever stoop to informing on their fellows, and if a grifter ends up in jail or the like, then the local con artist community can be counted upon

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

to donate to his bail or legal defense. An “us against them” attitude prevails amongst most professional grifters, and they tend to unite unflinchingly against anything they perceive as an outside threat; those within their ranks are supported without question while those outside are viewed as either potential threats or potential marks. Besides, no one wants their work to go unacknowledged; a group of trustworthy peers means the grifter will have an appreciative audience when he just can’t keep his latest score to himself.

At the same time, that trust can easily be betrayed if it falls within certain parameters. Because of their inherent self-confidence, grifters themselves are easy prey for the grift, and many con artists delight in stealing money from their own kind. The flush of deflating a rival who considered himself untouchable far outweighs more conventional targets, and a con artist who gets taken is much more likely to keep it to himself, since to acknowledge it would involve a considerable loss of face. More direct rip-offs are not unheard of as well; a successful inside man may decide to cut and run with the pay-off, rather than split it among his crew. Such betrayals often carry steep reprisals, and quite a few “bad eggs” sport permanent scars from wounds inflicted by the crews they skipped out on. Nevertheless, such incidents are not uncommon, and while the honor system is in full effect while the con is on, some grifters have no problems dispensing with it once their cash is in hand.

## TYPES OF BIG CON

Big cons are almost as varied as short cons; they can entail any number of permutations, and are often tailored to a particular mark. There are almost as many big cons as there are marks, each one different than the last. However, many can be divided into a few basic categories, which most professional con artists understand and make use of. Some of the most prominent types are discussed in detail below. Each entry includes a brief discussion of the typical set-up for such a con, as well as a variant example explaining how the same basic technique can be applied to different circumstances.

### 1) The Pay-Off

The pay-off is a gambling con, usually involving race tracks but also encompassing boxing matches, lotteries, the numbers racket, or anything else which people can bet on. The mark is led to believe that an “inside line” exists into a particular race or match, and that by colluding with the con artists, he can make a great deal of money betting on it. Once the roper secures the mark, the inside man appears, purporting to be a peripheral member of a criminal syndicate, or some other organization which fixes the outcome of sporting events. He demonstrates his ability, winning a fair amount of money for the mark and his roper. The mark is then enticed to place a huge bet, using the inside man’s infallible information as a ringer. Surely, he tells himself, he can’t lose. Naturally he does, and the con men make off with his money.

This type of con usually requires a well-stocked store and a number of shills to serve as window dressing. Horse races are a popular subject and the large number of them means that one

can be falsified with a minimum of difficulty. The store appears as a betting parlor or gambling den of some sort. The shills appear as prosperous betters, flashing a great deal of money around to further entice the mark. Once the play is made and the money is taken, getting rid of the mark is a simple matter. A feigned police raid on the establishment (using tailers as cops) usually convinces the mark to cut his losses, especially if he’s a respectable man whose reputation would suffer from the scandal. In extreme cases, something more drastic is required: usually a fake shooting or stabbing. The roper and inside man make the best candidates for a phony assassination, since they are the ones most familiar to the mark. A fight over the lost money — with seemingly lethal consequences — often has the mark running for the door as either the roper or the inside man lies “bleeding to death” on the floor behind him. Such a ploy is known as a *cackle bladder* among grifters, since the “corpse” facilitates the ruse with a small bladder full of fake blood hidden in his mouth or clothing.

### A Variant Example of the Pay-Off

The roper approaches his mark posing as the disgruntled employee of a corrupt millionaire. The millionaire likes to sponsor — and wager on — illegal prize fights. He has a pet gaunt boxer whom he pits against any human takers. The roper claims that he has convinced the gaunt to take a dive in the next fight. All he needs is someone to pony up a bet: someone unattached to the millionaire, who won’t arouse his employer’s suspicions, and who has the kind of money to really stick the knife in deep.

The night of the big fight occurs, and the mark puts up a substantial amount. The roper reassures the mark that things will go well: the gaunt is a seasoned pro, and knows how to make the fight look convincing before he goes down. The opposing boxer is a big man and can conceivably beat a gaunt if fortune smiles on him. For the first couple of rounds, they put on quite a show, battering each other mercilessly to the shouts of the crowd. The gaunt takes several nasty shots in the process, and it looks like he’ll be able to tank at the appropriate time and sell everyone on its authenticity.

Then something goes horribly wrong. The gaunt lands a seemingly random haymaker on the normal boxer, who goes down spurting blood. He lies on the canvas convulsing for a few seconds before falling still. The referee examines him, and begins shouting “he’s dead,” which sends the crowd into a panic. Everyone flees before the police arrive, and the normal boxer is left dead on the canvas.

If that isn’t enough to convince the mark to cut and run, a further scenario is required. The roper and the gaunt meet briefly with the mark; the gaunt claims that it was an accident — he didn’t think he hit the man that hard — but the roper is extremely upset, claiming that both their lives will be forfeit when the millionaire finds out. Their conversation is interrupted by an “attack” from the millionaire’s men, who gun down the gaunt and chase the mark and the roper away. The roper tells the mark that they should split up; the mark is still unknown in these circles and if he stays away from the roper, he’ll probably be safe. The roper claims he’s going to

## CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN



try to flee south before the millionaire catches up to him. They part, never to see each other again, and the mark presumably counts his lucky stars that he escaped the incident alive. Since he was involved in an illegal match and may possibly be an accessory to murder, he dare not breathe a word about the affair.

Everyone — the millionaire, the boxers, the referee, even the crowd — is in on the con. The boxing ring is simply an abandoned warehouse, which can be emptied after the con without arousing suspicion. The roper and the boxers claim the lion's share of the cut, while the inside man (usually playing the millionaire) gets a hefty stake as well for orchestrating the entire affair.

### 2) The Rag

The rag differs little from the pay-off, save that it focuses on the financial world instead of the gambling world. It involves passing off worthless stock as real, usually fleecing occasional speculators rather than experienced businessmen. The roper contacts the mark, purporting to be from a respectable company. He claims to have inside knowledge on a particular stock — presently worthless — which will soon be worth a great deal of money. Perhaps it's a company which has just landed a large government contract, or a worthless mine that suddenly strikes gold. Whatever the case, the stock will soon be extremely valuable, which makes getting in now — before

everyone finds out — a high priority. Naturally, the stock turns out to be worthless once it's finally bought... or worse, there never was any real stock in the first place.

Early versions of this con were simple and easy to perpetuate, but as the business community grew more sophisticated, so did the need for elaboration. The rag in the Unified Commonwealth often uses a store dressed up as a stock brokerage, with tickers, stock boards, brokers screaming into phones, and the like. The inside man must appear as an unimpeachable stalwart of the trade, often necessitating phony newspaper clippings trumpeting his accomplishments, skills acting as underlings, and the like. The roper guides the mark to him seemingly by accident, then encourages the inside man to use his "knowledge of the market" to make them a little cash. The inside man returns a short time later, having secured a tidy profit for them at the local brokerage. He then proposes to reinvest the money and make an even bigger profit, which he does. The process continues for several more passes — with the mark making progressively larger profits — until the time comes to fleece him.

The mark is then directed to the brokerage, and given a hot tip — a stock that can't lose. He and the roper put up their funds and watch the returns come in. With a gullible mark, the returns can simply evaporate, claiming the bulk of the mark's money. An argument with the inside man, culminating in another use of the cackle bladder, will be sufficient to brush him

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD



off. A more effective technique, however, is making the stock appear to do just what the inside man says it will do — increase exponentially and ensure a huge profit for the mark. Before the mark can collect, however, a pair of “policemen” arrive at the brokerage and take the roper, the mark, and the inside man into custody. They claim that the inside man is guilty of fraudulently manipulating the stock — the cause of all his success. The money has been seized as evidence and will be held pending a hearing, and the roper and the mark are being held as accomplices. The inside man confesses to wrongdoing, but claims that the roper and mark had nothing to do with it. They are soon released, leaving their tipster friend to his fate and the mark — now bereft of his money — grateful that he hasn’t been accused of a crime.

## **A Variant Example of the Rag**

The roper leads the mark to a piece of art — an extremely valuable painting being purchased for next to nothing. The buyer is an old woman who doesn’t seem to know its value. After much wheedling and pleading, she agrees to sell it to them at a drastic mark-up from her original purchase price: expensive, but still just a fraction of its actual value. The mark puts up the money and he and the roper take the painting. The roper then sets up an auction to sell it (with the store being disguised as an auction house) and the painting fetches a huge price from a wealthy buyer. Before they can collect however, the roper and the mark are arrested. The police claim that the painting is stolen and investigators have been searching for

it for some time. After much explaining, the roper convinces them that they had nothing to do with the theft, and they’re released without being charged. Unfortunately, the buyer at the auction has withdrawn his funds and the painting has been returned to its “rightful owner.” When they try to get their money back from the old woman, they learn that she has died, and that all of her money has been spent to pay off her debts.

Of course, the painting is a forgery, the auction is falsified, and both the police and the old lady are in on the con.

## **3) The Wire**

The wire is a time-honored con made famous by its use in *The Sting*. Its title is short for wire-tapping, a means by which the con artist could tap telegraph lines, decipher the results, and receive advance notice on horse racing and other events. Eventually, the notion evolved to the point where an actual race didn’t matter. All you needed was a phony bookmaker and a mark willing to believe in the scheme.

Usually, the inside man poses as a telegraph official. The roper secures the mark and leads him to a telegraph office, where he claims a family member (in actuality the inside man) is working. The inside man claims to be developing a scheme — illegal but highly profitable — and needs another partner to complete it. A local bookmaking operation makes use of the wire service, receiving the results of the horse races it does business on. The inside man claims he has worked out a system whereby he can delay delivery of the results, allowing



## CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN

### A QUICK NOTE ON WIRE SERVICES

Though wire services have seen a decline in twenty-first century America (largely due to the arrival of the internet and similar innovations), they were once an essential part of the modern landscape. They served as instant communication in a time when answering machines didn't exist, and the fastest anyone could get a letter was the time it took for a postal truck to drive it there. The Unified Commonwealth has several large telegraph companies, most notably Quick Time Wire and Mr. Speedy Telegraph Service. Quick Time has numerous offices in every city in the U.C., with outlets in cigar shops and general stores throughout the country. Wire services are an accepted part of life in the world of *The Edge of Midnight*, and most everyone has used them at some time or another.

a plant to lay down a huge bet just before they arrive. He just needs someone with enough money to bankroll it all, and to lay the bet down at the bookie's joint.

They test the method several times; each time it appears to work flawlessly. The store is dressed up to appear as the bookmaker's joint, with a ticker, a results board, and a collection of high rollers laying down extravagant wagers. The mark wins a fair amount of money playing the system. A phone near the entrance rings a few minutes before the race is announced; the inside man on the other end tells him the horse to bet on, and the mark lays down the bet. In some cases, his pay-off is mitigated simply by making the cashier's line is too long for him to get the bet down in time. It helps keep expenditures down, and prevents the possibility of the mark getting cold feet and walking away with too much. But every time, the inside man's horse wins, presumably making the mark eager to lay down some really big money. The roper and tailers monitor him carefully while he gathers the funds — sometimes totaling in the tens of thousands of dollars — then wait for his return.

And of course, when the mark lays down the big bet, it all goes wrong. The called horse loses and the inside man blames extenuating circumstances — the wire service got it wrong, the bet was supposed to be for the horse to place rather than win, or some other foul-up — and the mark's wager is gobbled up. A particularly easy mark will fall for this scheme several times, each time losing on another misunderstanding or screw-up. When the time comes to cut him loose, he and the roper receive a note from the inside man. His employers have learned what he is doing; he's been fired and they're preparing to file criminal charges. The two may be implicated as accessories and have to keep clear of him. This is usually enough to send the mark running from the entire scene as fast as he can.

#### A Variant Example of the Wire

The inside man — a warlock skilled in electricity magic — claims that he can plant phony information through a legitimate wire service. He taps into the line from a power station

on the outskirts of the city, using his magic to disrupt incoming signals and to send new signals of his own. He's honed it to the point where he can deliver any message he wants, and he intends to use it in order to make a ton of money. At the appointed time, he will intercept the results of a major horse race, and then transmit a phony set of results in which an extreme long shot finishes first. As long as there's a mark to lay down the money, they can make out like kings. And timing doesn't matter, since the warlock can determine the false results well in advance. By the time the ruse is discovered, the bettors will have collected their money and be long gone.

The roper brings in the mark and the warlock/inside man demonstrates the process. They can't do a dry run because of the risk of discovery, but the system seems foolproof. The mark and the roper will lay down the bet and then they'll meet afterwards to divvy up the winnings. Then when the bet is laid, everything goes wrong. The race runs as called, the long shot finishes last, and the mark loses all his money. When they go to meet the warlock, they're greeted by a pair of tailers posing as members of the local crystal ball squad, who tell them that their "partner" has been arrested on suspicion of practicing magic. They're inclined to take the mark and the roper in as well, but the roper bolts (with the mark following if he knows what's good for him), and a chase ensues. They finally manage to elude the cops, but must now disappear, since they are likely wanted on charges of practicing sorcery. The mark goes on his way, always looking over his shoulder for the forces of the law whom he still believes are after him.

#### 4) The Spanish Prisoner

The Spanish Prisoner derives its name from the sinking of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Numerous shipwrecked sailors were imprisoned by the English government and ransomed back to their families. Con artists in Spain seized upon the opportunity and began passing themselves off as go-betweens for the English, collecting ransom money from bereaved families of imprisoned sailors and then vanishing into the night. Soon enough, they realized that you didn't actually need a prisoner in order to work the con; you just needed someone willing to believe that such a prisoner existed. From there, the premise evolved into an obvious but surprisingly effective ruse that continues to bilk millions of dollars to this day. (Contemporary readers will recognize it in the infamous Nigerian email scam and similar hustles.)

Of course, none of the inhabitants of *The Edge of Midnight* are aware of these circumstances, but the con itself remains unchanged. In the U.C., it's referred to as "The Borderlands Dodge." The mark is approached with a letter — often sent out in bulk — purporting to come from a very wealthy man somewhere in the Borderlands. He was stopped at a border crossing, along with a trunk full of money and a beautiful young daughter. The trunk was impounded and he was arrested on some charge (falsely accused, he assures the reader), but he now must pay the court costs in order to free himself. If the reader agrees to pay the fee, the prisoner will happily split the money in the trunk with him. And of course, there's the young and lovely daughter, eager for a hero to protect her.



## GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Naturally, it's all a sham. There is no prisoner, no daughter, and no trunk full of money. When the reader wires the funds, it vanishes into the ether, and he never hears from his newfound contact again. Ideally, the mark sends his money with no questions asked, but in some cases — particularly those involving large amounts of funds — something more is required. In these cases, the mark actually travels down to the Borderlands to meet with the prisoner or his representative. In such cases, an elaborate ruse is devised, involving all the skullduggery and exotic adventure the crew can manage. They arrange for clandestine meetings in seamy locales, and whispered conversations with unsavory figures over cheap Borderlands beer. Arranging for the prisoner's release will be more difficult than first anticipated, the mark is informed. A judge will need to be bribed, and several other important officials must be paid off. If possible, the mark is actually brought in to meet the "prisoner," stowed in a sham jail and watched over by a corrupt "guard" who's willing to let the mark visit him. If

available, a "lovely daughter" sometimes proves helpful in this regard as well: meeting with the mark and providing a ray of hope as menacing figures circle closer and closer.

At the proper time, when the mark is ripe for the plucking, word leaks that something has gone terribly wrong with the plan. The judge they hoped to pay off has instead turned on them, and a warrant has been issued for the mark's arrest. Luckily, the corrupt "guard" has secured the prisoner's suitcase, and can provide the mark with his share of the loot — either a key to a locker holding the money, or a certified check. The terrified victim, eager to avoid incarceration in the hellish prisons of the Borderlands, is more than happy to hand over his remaining funds, collect the key or check, and scurry back across the border to the U.C. Naturally, the key is useless or the check turns out to be false, and the mark never sees any of the shady figures he encountered across the border again. Predictably, few ever speak about their foreign adventure, pressed into silence by the shame of it all.

### THE BIG STORE

The big store is a con man's "place of business," the location where his grifts go down. It's usually an empty space — a warehouse or an office suite — which can be dressed up to appear as anything required for the big con. If the mark is a gambler, it can appear as an illegal casino. If he's a businessman, it can appear as a bank or a law firm. All it needs are the right trappings (supplied by the manager) and a few shills to make it appear official. Well-established crews can use a big store over and over again, changing its looks to fit whatever play they're making. Few stores are permanent, however; once enough grifts are played at one, it's time to move on before the authorities catch on. A proper big store can appear as anything the grifters wish: accurate down to the last detail and utterly convincing to even the most jaded mark.

Most stores in big cities operate at the behest of the local crime syndicate, and the owners are forced to pay protection money in order to keep it open. Paying off the crime lords is usually the duty of the inside man, who's keeping a piece of the take for such "operating" expenses. Local police and political officials may be paid off in a similar fashion. Setting up the big store is usually the purveyance of a manager (see page 18), who procures the equipment necessary to properly "dress the set." Ownership of the store is carefully hidden, usually using false names or dummy outfits to disguise the real perpetrators. Naturally, the grifters will pay off the key holders in some appropriate fashion — either straight-up rent or a piece of the grift. When the time comes to move on, they make sure that no traces exist of their former occupancy. The store is wiped free of all fingerprints and the only evidence that they inhabited it at all are a few nails on the wall.

You'd be hard pressed to believe it if you saw the store in full swing. Stock tickers or roulette wheels rattle with activity, attended to by well-dressed shills playing their roles to perfection. Obedient operators, devoted to their duties, write on blackboards depicting the latest stock returns or the results of horse races. Everywhere people are hustling and bustling... and always, there are great piles of money exchanging hands, for the more money which a mark sees, the more his own avarice will pull him into the trap. Big stores are vital to any serious con, for they allow the grifters to control every aspect of the mark's experience, leading him where they need him to go without risking any unforeseen developments. Similarly, the big store can assuage a skeptical mark's fears, convincing him that his present course of action will indeed net him the vast sums that he hopes. Without a big store, an elaborate con game stands very little chance of success.

Sometimes, grifters need to use actual locations to facilitate the con; the façade of a big store can't hope to pass off as an established locale such as city hall or a well-known police station. In such circumstances, the manager must get creative. He needs to secure a viable section of the building in question for the duration of the mark's visit — usually no more than a few hours — without arousing suspicion. Often, this requires additional bribes to key officials, who will look the other way when the grifters arrive. It also needs an excuse to keep random passers-by away, lest they throw the grifters off their mark or otherwise queer the con. With key officials in their pocket, the con artists can usually manufacture a viable excuse to cordon off a given area of the building. Many pose as painters, who are in the needed area to "touch up" the walls or ceiling. A feigned plumbing back-up can work as well, though it requires more complicated preparations. With the right officials behind them, securing the site can require little more than a "closed for repairs" sign and an easy way to ferry the mark in. Such simplicity often comes at a price, however, since "the right officials" usually cost quite a bit. Regardless of the requirements, however, the manager must often go to great lengths to land the site, making it one of the most difficult — and creatively rewarding — aspects of his job.

# CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN

With luck, running the Spanish Prisoner requires little more than a mimeograph machine and some patience. Many con artists send them out by the thousands and if the mark is suitably hooked, he'll send the money without necessitating any further deception. Otherwise, it pays to have a store ready. Seedy bars are no problem, but a plausible jail must be found, uniforms provided for the prisoners and guard, and skills contacted to play various "menacing figures." In extreme cases, the crew must make use of a plausible courthouse, and have one of their number serve as a judge. Luckily, this is easier to do in the Borderlands than in the U.C. Belatacan and Nuevo Dia have plenty of hustlers willing to help out for a cut, and the lack of familiarity with Borderlands legal procedure makes keeping the mark off balance a supremely easy proposition.

### A Variant Example of the Spanish Prisoner

A warlock is contacted by one of his fellows, who claims he got the address from a mutual (and anonymous) friend. He says he has a book of incalculable value — experimental notes written by a member of the Order of Nu — which he has just smuggled into the country. Unfortunately, he's a wanted man, and the police are searching for him. The local gangsters are keeping him safe, but they want a fee for their services and refuse to release him until he pays it. If the mark will help him out of this jam, he'll share the contents of the book with him.

The beauty of this set up is that it gives the mark the impression that he holds all the cards. It also requires few props, and only a few tailors to service as supposed musclemen for the "mob." The mark meets with his new pen pal — and the men holding him — in an abandoned parking lot or the like. They arrive by car, never allowing the "captive" warlock out. The mark is shown several pages from the book, verifying its authenticity. Once he pays up, the warlock is released and the mark is given the key to a locker containing the book. The locker is empty and the "captive warlock" is long gone by the time the mark finds out. (Alternately, if the mark insists on collecting the book immediately, he's given a dummy copy, which appears authentic but in fact contains nothing but empty gibberish.)

## ROLE-PLAYING THE CON

Role-playing a con game properly requires that the GM set exactly the right tone. Cons in RPGs generally take one of two forms: the player characters are either the con men or the marks. The first type is likely the most common in an *Edge of Midnight* game; players generally dislike being victimized the way marks are... though if played right, it can make an beautiful addition to a campaign. (Revenge is a strong motivator and a desire to get one's money back can lead to any number of plot twists and complications.) Unless otherwise stated, however, the below text assumes that the player characters are the con artists, not the victims.

## STRUCTURE OF THE CON

Every con, no matter how wild or original, follows the same basic formula, which may be applied to the development of role-playing story or scenario. Below are a series of entries outlining each step in a big con's structure, along with tips and guidelines on how to best incorporate it into an RPG setting — and how to include characters who might not be full-time grifters.

### 1) Selection and Investigation of the Victim

With the basics of a con in mind, the characters begin selecting a good mark to fleece — someone who will fall for the con they have in mind. In some cases, they have a particular mark they wish to take, which means that the con itself must be tailored to fit his tastes and habits. Regardless of who he is, however, the PCs will have a lot of legwork to do: digging into the mark's past, tailing him to learn his routine, etc. Private investigators are ideal for this stage of the con, as they gather the information needed to put the screws in. The investigators should be adept at appearing inconspicuous, and be ready to vanish if the mark (or his associates) become suspicious.

### 2) Gaining the Victim's Confidence

This is the most vital part of the con, and usually involves multiple characters. The victim is approached by a roper in some manner that alleviates suspicion, often by posing as someone in the victim's line of work. Once a rapport has been established, the roper introduces the mark to an inside man, who has some professed means of making a great deal of money or acquiring something of value quickly. (Depending upon the con, the inside man might profess a way to avoid *losing* money, instead of gaining it.) The method is demonstrated to the victim to reassure him of the grifters' good intentions and convince him of their sincerity. He is often allowed to make a small profit or the like, which only further cements his confidence.

Obviously, this stage involves a great deal of role-playing, as the characters slowly insinuate themselves with the mark (likely an NPC). Career con artists are usually the strongest here, although singers and other performers can sometimes be extremely helpful as well. High Moxie scores and a bevy of social skills play an important part, and if possible, all interaction should take place through actual role-playing, instead of just die rolls (though they can be used to augment the drama if the players aren't up for extensive verbal acrobatics).

### 3) Fleecing the Victim.

With the mark on the hook, it's time to reel him in. The characters posit an amount of money to be put up, an object or piece of information to be divulged, etc. Good con artists will let the mark himself suggest putting up the money, but that may not always be possible. With the prize secured, the victim is enticed to hand it over — either to the roper, the inside man, or to a third (purportedly neutral) party who's in on the con.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## THE BETRAYING EMPLOYER

One tried and true role-playing trope which — with some slight tweaking — can easily facilitate a PC-targeted confidence game is the Betraying Employer. Veteran players know the notion well: a wealthy individual contracts the characters to retrieve a precious object, gather certain information, rescue a kidnapped relative, or the like. Once they fulfill the mission, they learn that they have been played all along — doing their employer's dirty work under false pretenses while he robs them blind, sets them up to take the fall, etc. In most cases, the party gets a chance to confront the betrayer — usually in the story's climax — and gain some measure of payback. In this case, the GM need only defer that confrontation. The employer skips town, perhaps leaving a mocking note for the players to find or — even better — arranging for the police to meet them at the confrontation point instead. It should take some time for the PCs to extricate themselves from the situation, leaving them hot under the collar, and itching to hunt the bastard down.

Often, a big store is used to complete the illusion (see page 24), requiring a number of accomplices playing appropriate parts. The roper and the inside man are apt to do most of the work, which at this stage involves little more than making sure the mark doesn't get cold feet.

### 4) Getting Away Clean (The Blow-Off)

Once the money is in hand, the con has succeeded and an exit strategy can begin. The characters must remove the victim as quietly as possible and take steps to prevent the law from becoming involved. A well-devised con can simply leave the victim hanging — standing around at a pre-arranged locale while the characters make for the nearest train station. If that isn't possible, then a diversion must come into play: something to draw the victim's attention away from his loss and towards more pressing concerns. Usually, fear for his safety — a feigned mob hit, a fire, or some other immediate threat — can persuade him to cut his losses and run. This becomes much easier if the victim believes he is involved in something illegal. Just as greed initially hooked him, guilt (or at least fear of being punished) can swiftly cut him loose. A phony police raid, a night in jail (courtesy of a few bribes at the local precinct), or threats of exposure will not only convince him to move along, but will keep him silent should the opportunity ever arise to implicate the characters.

Similarly, smart con artist characters will make sure that the local police never become involved, either by bribing key personnel or even using members of the force as shields (police-men on a "raid" can make a strong enticement if the victim is eager to avoid arrest).

Musclemen or anyone good with firearms are excellent additions to this stage of the scenario. A few well-placed shots or a quick bruising can convince the mark to get out and never look back. A gunman may even wound the roper or another compatriot, which would sell the illusion that what has transpired is not part of the plan (even though it most assuredly is). Warlocks are also good at this stage, since most people are too terrified of magic to think twice about fleeing for their lives.

## PES AS MARKS

Getting a PC to fall for an in-game con often entails getting his or her *player* to buy into it too. That means using an enticement besides money (since in-game money means almost nothing to a player). Similar lures will likely smell fishy, and the PCs should never knowingly accede to a grift just because it's required to move the scenario along. Simply put, the con loses its power unless the players are caught by surprise and realize that they've been had. How can a GM do that in ways that respect the players? It's not easy, but a few rules can help facilitate it.

Most gamers have an inherent sense of greed when it comes to their characters. The notion of advancement is often central to a role-playing game, and players tend to get very excited at the prospect of increasing their skills and gaining new abilities. That instinct can be used to hook them into an in-game con very easily... though it smacks of metagame thinking ("if I help them pull this job, then I'll have enough experience points to finally increase my Brawn...") and must therefore be handled with suitable care. The best solution is to wrap it up in something more directly connected to the gaming universe itself: something which in-game character and metagame player will both be interested in.

Plot-based enticements are even better: the chance to get even with an old enemy, for example or gain power in an intangible way (becoming the new D.A., perhaps, or an assistant chief of police). A good con artist will tap into those desires and use them to exploit the characters to his or her advantage. Such desires are usually deeper and more fundamental than simple (and nonexistent) money, making it more likely that the players will let their characters take the bait without pausing to consider the consequences. Plot-based enticements also lack the taint of metagame thinking, and help enrich the role-playing environment exponentially.

Similarly, once the con is played, the loss should be tangibly felt. A loss of abilities is unlikely (and fairly harsh to boot), but a loss of resources can often pinch them in unexpected ways, and NPC friends or other contacts who are rendered unapproachable because of the con could return to haunt them at a later date. Warlock PCs who lose their spellbooks, gangster PCs barred from the capo's presence, or cop PCs busted and reduced to desk work (or even walking a beat) will leave an impression that resonates beyond the characters themselves and into the players portraying them.

It is imperative, however, not to overdo it. The players should never be unduly angered or upset to the point where they can't leave their losses at the gaming table. While it should affect them, it shouldn't cause *anyone* undue distress,

## CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN



and as the facilitator of the game, the GM is responsible for ensuring that everyone stays in the proper spirit. Always keep in mind the con's ultimate purpose in the campaign. It shouldn't be to show the players up or make them feel foolish, but rather to take the game to interesting — and ultimately fulfilling — places. And of course, *no* con should *ever* go beyond the game itself, to the point where the players and not their characters are being swindled. That's not role-playing; that's just being a dick.

A chance at payback should come once the player characters become aware that they've been taken. (And they should *always* be made aware sooner or later; a con which fools them indefinitely serves no purpose other than to relieve them of resources, and there are countless less duplicitous ways to do that.) The GM should have a strong idea of how the players will react, and what steps they will take to redress their characters' grievances. This is where the PCs' status as marks bears fruit; the party will likely seek to regain what they have lost, track down the parties responsible, or otherwise avenge themselves upon the con artists who fooled them. The path to fulfillment can take an infinite number of twists and turns, and develop in any direction the GM chooses. The con exists to motivate the players; if they've been truly taken (as opposed to just going along with it for the sake of the campaign), their emotions will play more deeply into whatever storyline you

have in mind for them. They'll be more eager to press forward, more interested in new developments, and generally getting more enjoyment out of the campaign — regardless of whether they ultimately get revenge or not.

### PCS AS CON ARTISTS

The majority of *Edge of Midnight* cons will likely see the players on the other end of the equation: as the smooth operators looking to take a big mark for all he's worth. A large, complicated scam can involve a variety of different skills, and entail an entire evening's worth of gaming.

When framing the con within the overall campaign, several important factors should be considered. Though not absolutely necessary, they can help turn a routine con into a truly memorable scenario.

#### 1) The mark should be meaningful.

Targeting an unknown stranger — no matter how prosperous — contains little narrative punch, and runs the risk of boring the players. On the other hand, a mark in whom the players have an invested emotional interest — an old enemy, say, or an extremely well-known NPC — can charge the scenario with excitement and ensure that the group feels a sense of accomplishment greater than a few meaningless dollar figures



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

on their character sheets. To that end, the GM should have an extremely well-developed NPC lined up as the target. Flesh out his personality as much as possible. Profile his likes and dislikes, his daily habits, and his family and acquaintances. Know how he behaves and what he will do if he realizes he's been tricked. The better the personality, the more interesting and exciting the con becomes. If it's at all feasible, something in the mark's character should figure into the con. If he likes betting at the track, perhaps the characters can use that to rope him; if he has a daughter whom he hasn't seen since she was a small child, one of the characters can impersonate her during the con; and so on.

## 2) The con should have ramifications.

Similarly, while a single scenario can encapsulate the con, the effects of it should be felt elsewhere in the gaming world. If the mark is itching for revenge, he may cause complications in future scenarios, and even if he isn't, the characters will likely need to avoid him. The money (or objects) they claimed presumably once served some other purpose which has now been thwarted. Perhaps it was intended as a mobster's pay-off and the mark was killed when he couldn't produce it. Or it was going to charity and all those 3<sup>rd</sup> St. orphans will have to go hungry this Christmas. It can even be a "positive" loss — the money was earmarked for guns intended to start a turf war, for instance, or a bribe for a politician who, denied his kick-back, will vote against a harmful bill. Whatever the outcome, the characters should see some impact from it in the gaming world, either good or bad.

An especially interesting way to facilitate this involves a pay-off other than money: an important piece of information, or a rare object with applications besides buying power. If it's something that other people want (and which can't be gained from another source), then the characters may find themselves the subject of much attention after the con, as everyone tries to beg, borrow, or bully it from them. The ways of using such a prize could easily form a second scenario, or be spun into already-existing elements within your campaign.



## 3) The con should involve everyone.

A big con involves numerous grifters, all playing a necessary part in order to bring it to a successful conclusion. As with anything else in your campaign, it should be tailored to include the unique skills and abilities of every player character. Luckily, cons don't need to entirely involve career con artists in order to work. "Civilians" looking for a quick payday can fill key duties. Police characters can be used to deter suspicion, or prevent the law from becoming involved. Private eyes can provide information on the mark's habits, while bruisers can appear as outside threats to entice the mark into playing his hand. And regardless of the characters' occupations, a big con will always need shills, ropers, and other figures to reel the fish in. As with any other scenarios, the PCs should fill as many of these roles as possible, and the GM should make sure that everyone has a part to play in executing the plan successfully.

## 4) The con should have a strong hook and an exciting pay-off.

Designing a good con is hard. It needs a fun catch — something to fire up the imagination — and an entertaining build-up as the party prepares for the big score. The players should be encouraged to fill in as many details as they can, and if they come up with the core concept on their own, then by all means allow them to develop it. But even the most creative party may need a little prompting to get started. The GM should prepare several key elements to serve as a backbone to the con — starting with the mark himself (discussed above) but also including a viable means of extracting the money, a location where the con can take place, and the like. He or she can hold such aspects in reserve, or adapt them to the players' designs if they're sufficiently proactive, but having them ready beforehand will give the con a basic structure, and allow the GM to lend assistance if the players are struggling with a good hook.

Furthermore, when the time comes to land the fish, it should never be as easy as it first appears. White-knuckle tension should be the order of the day, and the players should be on the edge of their seats as all their plans come down to a few well-timed skill rolls or the mark's willingness to take the final plunge. If things go wrong, the characters will have to think quickly to salvage the con — prompting some intense role-playing moments — or else run for the hills (see the sidebar on the next page for more information). Whatever the outcome, it should be as climactic and exciting as the conclusion to any other scenario.

## OTHER DETAILS

With all of those factors in mind, there are a few additional things the GM can do to ensure that a con scenario stays on track. Firstly, the players should be encouraged to develop as much of the con on their own as they can. While the details provided here and in other books can provide a strong framework, cons work best if the players themselves provide the bulk of the planning. In order to help facilitate this, the

## CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN

GM should provide several easy hooks that can guide the players in the right direction; for example, if you want the con to involve a boxing match, make the mark prone to bet on boxing or possess an untapped fascination with the sport. Then step back and allow the players to run with the ball as they see fit. The more they can come up with their own ideas — and implement them accordingly — the more organic the con will feel.

Similarly, try to anticipate a structure which can be tailored to fit the characters' plans. Like any other scenario, a good con should work with their wishes, not force them into something which they don't want to do. If you need them to run into a certain policeman during the con, make sure he can be inserted in a variety of locations. If you have an elaborate set piece planned, adjust it to fit the characters' scheme, perhaps changing a few details or its placement in the scenario to better accommodate what they have in mind. If they come up with a notion you haven't thought of, by all means let them run with it. In most cases, the scenario can be adjusted with just a little fine tuning on your part.

The unpredictability of the big con is part of what makes it so exciting. As implied above, the inclusion of unexpected twists or events which the players have not anticipated can make for some brilliant role-playing, forcing them to think quickly and come up with solutions on the fly. Good examples of an unexpected twist include an old enemy showing up at an inopportune time, a key detail being misplaced or mislabeled, or the mark simply growing suspicious (requiring some smooth explaining to keep him on track). In such circumstances, it pays to be prepared in case the whole thing blows up. If the players can't maintain the con, then the scenario may have to shift into damage control as they scramble to stay out of trouble (see the sidebar below for more details.)

Finally, peripheral events play a pivotal part in any grift: from setting up the store to defusing any crises that arise before the big pay-off. Things which seem incidental at the time can add fun and excitement to the build up of a con... provided the GM develops them properly. Most big cons require props, paperwork, and other essentials to help entice the mark. The manager's job can provide easy hooks for a large number of

### D'OH!

In classic con stories, something always goes wrong. A grift which works exactly according to plan is one of the duller stories conceived, and con artist PCs who always fool their marks are apt to become bored and restless very quickly. GMs should plan and be ready for the inevitable moment when a twist of fate turns the players' carefully orchestrated master deception on its head. In some cases, that failure can be pre-planned, involving some element over which the players have absolutely no control. That makes things a little easier for the GM, since it can be anticipated accordingly and entails less thinking on the fly. However, something random and intangible — such as a failed die roll at a pivotal moment — can achieve the same results without bringing the *deus ex machina* to the fore. Countless con stories hinge on some tiny little detail — something seemingly inconsequential — which causes the entire affair to blow up in the protagonists' face. A failed die roll, or even a partial success, is the perfect way to slide such an element into the scenario.

Having said that, it doesn't necessarily need to come out of the blue. Even though it crops up unexpectedly, it can still tie in to other events in the scenario... with a little help from the GM. The results achieve a stronger sense of dramatic symmetry and help the con become more memorable. For instance, perhaps the deception requires one of the characters to swap a briefcase full of money for an identical briefcase full of shredded newspaper. The skill roll to make the switch fails. The easy solution is to say that the mark notices the switch. But what if, in securing the money beforehand, the characters were involved in a tussle with a group of thugs? The GM could say that the results of the fight damaged the lock on the briefcase, and when the time comes to make the switch, it springs open — spilling the shredded newspaper out in front of everyone. Not only does such a result help strengthen the unfolding story, but it speaks to random fate rather than player character failure.

Similarly, a blown roll can play on some aspect of the character's personality — some preexisting quirk or flaw which gets the better of the PC, instead of just an imperfect skill rank. If the character tends to get angry, perhaps a buzzing light causes him to lose his temper at the wrong moment. If he's a skirt chaser, maybe the wrong pair of legs walks by at the worst possible time. Again, the onerous is taken off the mechanics of the die roll and placed in the realm of storytelling. The grifter's own weakness plays against him, not a bad break with the d10s by his player.

Failure in this manner doesn't mean that the entire operation should be scrapped... though it may mean some scrambling from the party. If the con is blown, they should have an opportunity to recover from it, or at least escape in one piece. If the rigmarole of foot chases and fisticuffs doesn't feel quite right, you can give them some wiggle room, perhaps adding another obstacle or two which the characters will now have to deal with. It needn't even be directly related to the failed skill roll; it can simply signal an unexpected twist to interfere with their plans.

Whatever the outcome, failures during a con are a natural and normal part of this style of story. The human shortcomings upon which *film noir* depends are as important in the grift as they are in any other scenario, and should be used to enhance and develop the drama, rather than simply ruining long and careful planning. It will make the accomplishment much more memorable if they can bluff their way through such a failure, and if they can't, then at least the ensuing mayhem will have tangible connections to the overall story.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

encounters. If the con needs a particular type of check, for example, or police badges from a specific precinct, then the PCs will need to acquire them before they can proceed. Money is often the most important prop: easy cash flashed before a mark makes hooking him infinitely easier. Procuring enough funds to make the con look good — even if it's just a loan — might require the PCs to perform any number of tasks for their erstwhile creditors.

Deflecting potential trouble makes an excellent task as well, especially for characters who aren't as skilled at social interaction as their fellows. A meddling cop or an old enemy might make things difficult for an ongoing con. A well-timed diversion from the PCs could help draw their attention away, as could the intervention of outside parties such as the local crime syndicate or the NLEB. Other cons might entail more elaborate preparations: shutting off electricity, for example, or tampering with the sewer lines. A small group of physically tough characters would be ideal for facilitating such hijinks, while their honey-tongued cohorts continue to prepare for the con itself.

## THE CON ARTIST CAMPAIGN

Campaigns based around con artists are more difficult to pull off than other types of campaigns. Though excellent for single scenarios, the constant rhythm of roping marks, setting them up, and taking their money can grow old very quickly. The way to maintain an extended con artist campaign — like any other campaign — is to make sure things never become repetitive. Three easy ways of doing so are natural parts of grifter scenarios: 1) varying the types of cons, 2) making the pay-offs more than just money or equipment, and 3) ensuring that early scenarios affect and shape those that come later in the campaign.

### 1) Vary the Con

Like any other type of scenario, a confidence game requires variety. The players will soon grow restless if they play the same old con against the same type of mark, and the more they fall back on established routines, the duller the campaign will be. Finding new ways to bilk marks of their money becomes the campaign's overarching challenge, as the grifter PCs dream up new ways to deceive their victims, different set-ups and locales to use, and more dangerous marks to fleece. The types of cons discussed earlier in this chapter can provide a good palette to work from. If the PCs have used the wire a few times, let them try the rag or the Spanish Prisoner. If they've fleeced a series of gangsters, give them a legitimate businessman or a crooked cop to take. Varying each mark's interests can help encourage new twists on the con as well. An obsessive card shark might give way to a paranoid warlock or a mob accountant — each one requiring a different hook, play, and finale in order to take his money.

### 2) Vary the Reward

Along those lines, the rewards for each new con should show depth and imagination as well. While most big cons involve taking the mark's money, an enterprising group can aim for much more interesting goals. Perhaps they need the deed to a friend's bar, which would protect their favorite hang-out and keep them from being shoved out by the new owners. Or they need to woo a femme fatale away from her latest victim before she gets him to rewrite his will. The best pay-offs involve revenge for past wrongs or a mark who clearly deserves to be fleeced. Corrupt politicians and arrogant gangsters make great targets for a well-planned grift, and get the players more interested by investing it with a tangible emotional reward at the end. Everyone likes seeing a loathsome NPC take it on the chin, especially when it's the party throwing the punches.

### 3) Never Forget the Consequences

Finally, every successful grift leaves a fleeced mark behind it, and every fleeced mark is potential trouble. Cops on the take might suddenly decide to change their stripes, and things could get dicey if the tolerant local crime syndicate is suddenly overthrown by a bloodthirsty rival. The changing conditions of a campaign can bring a great deal of vigor to an otherwise static series of cons, which provided a tangible sense of progress from the beginning to the end. Con artists try to live in the present, but the past never stays buried in *The Edge of Midnight*. Nothing breaks the tedium better than suddenly forcing the PCs to run for their lives as a powerful former victim comes looking to get even, or a firebrand politician targets them as part of his new crackdown against crime. Such scenarios add refreshing nuances to a campaign, while still focusing squarely on con games and their consequences.

## CON ARTISTS IN MIXED PARTIES

The guidelines above imply a party composed primarily or exclusively of grifters. What do you do when only one or two PCs fit the mold? Obviously, the common thread of belonging to the Few puts everyone in the same boat, but several additional steps can help con artists fit in well with the remainder of the party. Like any other mixed group, the key is to balance con-heavy scenarios with those more conducive to the whole party's enjoyment. Non-grifter PCs can easily play a part in a big con as shills, tailers, and the like. This works especially well if the con requires a specific skill possessed by one of the other PCs, or if the archetype they embody (cop, gangster, etc.) plays a central role in duping the mark. It makes the characters feel more central to the con, and allows them to share in the fun without being left on the sidelines.

So too, can con artist PCs parlay their abilities to serve in non-con scenarios. Grifters' generally charming personalities make them great front men, able to elicit information or gain access to guarded locations with ease. Their short con abilities can generate quick money if the party is strapped for cash, while their ability to size people up can help them spot hidden enemies or those out of place in an otherwise innocuous setting. Such skills are hardly limited to straight-up grifts, and can help almost any party achieve their goals.

## CHAPTER ONE: CON MEN

### CON ARTISTS IN THE UNIFIED COMMONWEALTH

Grifting is as much a part of the U.C. as mom and apple pie. The nation's entrepreneurial spirit naturally lends itself to a little hustling here and there, and it's not hard to slide a legitimate business opportunity into something decidedly shadier. The art of the con is in actuality little more than salesmanship — convincing the mark to buy into a certain scenario — which comes as second nature to many U.C. citizens. Small wonder, then, that con artists flourish within its borders, serving as darker cousins to the inventors and innovators that supposedly lifted the country to greatness.

The two cities most conducive to grifters are Central City and Paradiso. Central City, with its emphasis on travel and vibrant underworld, produces a bumper crop of shysters who use the city as a base of operations. The train station makes an idea point for roping marks, as well as providing a fast means of escape should the law grow too suspicious. Central City con artists are generally well organized, working hand-in-hand with the metropolis's organized crime families to bring in the shills. Several permanent stores have been set up, mostly in the areas around the train station where a recurring series of big cons keeps operating year 'round. The city's notorious corruption ensures that the police stay out of their hair, and the mobs provide much bigger targets for the cops to chase regardless. As long as the crime bosses get their cut and none of their minions are fleeced, the city's grifters can more or less do as they please.

Paradiso's con artists are much different, but no less successful. The home of show business instinctively clings to vaudeville traditions, and the barker's hustle finds fertile ground amid the studio moguls and their neon-coated dreams. The city's infamous North Side sees the short con as a way of life, with countless sharks and hustlers running their scams amid the bordellos and gambling parlors. Many con artists view Paradiso as the place to go following their mythic retirement, plying a few grifts while soaking in the sun and sand. And those serious about giving up the con artists' way of life will find plenty of demand for their talents in the film and publicity industry...

Other cities have their share of criminal scamsters, though not quite as prevalent as these two. New Eden con artists are

mostly small-time operators, with only a few big stores cropping up here and there. They prefer financial scams like the rag, eager to fleece the city's more naïve business interests. Nova Roma is inhospitable to illegal cons, though the city's cutthroat politics means that everyone is playing a dodge of some sort on somebody else. The near-anarchy of Terminus is conducive to far more violent forms of crime, but the illicit money garnered by its criminal interests means that suitably





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

bold grifters can grow quite wealthy by fleecing gullible underlings. Gateway's con artists specialize in gambling, setting up quick card-playing scams or big cons like the pay-off beneath the watchful eye of more established interests.

Since grifters are such a mobile breed, the amount of "cross pollination" between cities is quite high. Smart professional con men will work a "circuit" of several cities over the course of a few years, moving from one locale to another as opportunities dry up (and their faces become a little too well-known). More than any other criminal type (save perhaps hit men), the con artist calls every city in the U.C. his home.

Several con artist crews have made a name for themselves in the Commonwealth of late; though unknown in legitimate circles, their names are easily recognizable to the underground community, and those with connections in the right circles. The most famous are the 3<sup>rd</sup> Street Tanks from Central City, whose regular wire cons take in several hundred thousand dollars a year. Al Vendecce's band of shysters run a series of horse-racing cons throughout the Nova Roma area, while Bernie Karlson and Grimm Otisson can be found fishing for marks on the Gateway-Paradiso train lines. Too much fame is never a good thing for con artists, however, and time will tell whether the growing notoriety of these groups will bring them too much of the wrong kind of attention.

## CON ARTIST NPC

### POLECAT CHARLIE

*(Charlie can serve as a manager or other supporting con artist for any grift which the player characters have in mind.)*

Charlie Buckwell's father was a small-time grifter who rode the rails with the boy, engaging in three-card monte games and other cheap forms of swindling. Charlie himself had no love for the old man, who viewed his son as an extended prop rather than a flesh-and-blood person. The young Buckwell was also a great deal smarter than his father and rapidly saw through most of his shabby cons. He went his own way at thirteen, practicing variants of the twenties and the wipe, and using his youthful appearance to allay any suspicions. By the time he was old enough to vote, he had graduated to far more sophisticated cons, working with a series of crews that netted huge cash scores in the space of just a few short years. He earned his nickname during a particularly memorable grift, using the carcass of a dead skunk to keep the mark away from a key cache of goods.

He makes Nova Roma his base of operations, though he rarely stays in any one place for long. His list of contacts is quite extensive and he takes care not to antagonize them, playing fair with any fellow grifter he meets. As a consequence, he's always welcome at the known gathering spots and will happily play a part in any con which comes along. Charlie's specialty is the rag; he can affect the mannerisms of a prosperous busi-

nessman with ease, and his knowledge of economic matters allows him to fool even seasoned financial veterans. But he's never lost a taste for the short con, and can often be found bilking gamblers with dice swindles and three-card monte variants. He's also quite an adept manager, and can scrounge together a wondrous array of trappings with only a few hours' notice. As a shill or incidental figure, he's perfected several "characters" which he can slide into at a moment's notice. His favorite is a dapper Terminus gentleman with a waxed moustache and broad hat, given to betting large amounts on horses with ladies' names.

He's worked with several large crews before, and while he rarely serves as an inside man, his organizational skills are a considerable asset to any crew he joins. He keeps an eye on a few potential stores in every large city in the U.C., ready to swoop in and set them up the moment they're needed. Like most con artists, he's poor as a church mouse most of the time. Money burns a hole in his pocket and his taste for high-priced call girls often leaves him without so much as a handful of change. He also dabbles in heroin use, and while the drug hasn't hooked him just yet, he might find himself in big trouble if that monkey gets any bigger. He keeps his addiction hidden from any comrades he makes.

Charlie stands about average height, with thick blonde hair and a puffy face that appears quite featureless at a distance. He can affect a wide variety of accents, and is quite well-spoken, exercising a considerable vocabulary whenever he's on the grift. When he's not working, he returns to his hobo's roots, speaking in crude terms and paying no attention to social niceties. He dresses in formerly expensive suits grown threadbare and shabby from over-use, though he'll wear whatever is appropriate during a given grift. He carries a large switchblade in his back pocket — more for show than anything else, since he's never had to stab anyone with it. When cornered, he's apt to surrender without a fight, and trust his affable charm to see him through. He's endured several stints in prison, and while he'd prefer not to go back, he knows that he can survive there.

#### Polecat Charlie

**Attributes:** Brains 5, Brawn 4, Build 5, Gut 7, Moxie 8, Smoothness 6.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 25.

**Skills:** Appraise 7, Athletics 3, Brawl 2, Bureaucracy 5, Disguise 6, Etiquette 7, Evasion 5, Fast Talk 8, Lore (Finance) 6, Melee 2, Perception 6, Perform (Acting) 7, Puzzles 5, Sleight of Hand 7, Stealth 4, Streetwise 6.

**Backgrounds:** Charismatic, Lucky, Wise.

**Profession:** Con Artist 2, Thief 1.



# CHAPTER TWO THIEVES AND ROBBERIES

™ They all live seemingly normal ,  
decent lives, but they've got their  
problems... and they've all got a  
little larceny in 'em.

- Johnny Clay (Sterling Hayden),  
*The Killing*

## THIEVES AND ROBBERS

*Detective Peterson sighed as he stepped out of the squad car; the flashing police lights illuminated the home of New Eden's foremost newspaper publisher. Red brick walls glared back at him like a grumpy dowager, offended at the very notion of having to open their doors to someone like him. He wove his way through the uniformed cops taking statements from servants and underlings to the grand foyer, where his host stood fuming in slippers and a dressing gown.*

*"It's about time you showed up! I've been waiting here for nearly an hour!"*

*Peterson sighed again and rolled his eyes.*

*"Well then, let's not keep you any longer, Mr. Brooks. Show me where the crime occurred, and we'll see about getting your property back for you."*

*After a focused look and an indignant "harumpf," Nicholas Brooks turned back into the house. He neither gestured nor spoke, but rather expected Peterson to follow him unbidden. With a practiced and deliberate shamle, the detective obliged him.*

*"I keep most of my art in the den," Brooks said after a time. "It's all valuable, but the thief knew exactly which one to take." He stopped at the library doors, then threw them open with a dramatic flourish. The room beyond was lit by the embers of a dying fire and by a series of lamps — their illumination thrust upward like defiant fists. Between the rows and rows of bookshelves were a series of paintings, carefully mounted and designed to blend in with the décor. Most of them looked impressive — family portraits, romantic scenes, landscapes by someone vaguely famous — but the centerpiece was something else entirely.*

*It was mounted above the fireplace, designed to stand out in the surrounding room. Had it still been in its frame, it would have drawn the eye no matter where you stood. Pierre's The Marble Steps. Even a working schlub like Peterson knew that name. It should be in a museum, he thought to himself, not shut up in some fat cat's rumpus room.*

*Except it wasn't in the fat cat's rumpus room. Not anymore. Someone — the same someone Peterson had been summoned in the middle of the night to catch — had broken in and removed it. An almost perfect circle was cut into the skylight above, and then removed like a cookie from an expanse of dough. A knotted rope descended into the room, stopping at almost the precise height of the painting. The thief had removed it with a scalpel, deftly cutting the canvas free of its frame before shimmying back up the rope. In its place, he had left a crudely sketched caricature of the original piece. Childish stick figures smiled up from blocky buildings, resting under a happy sun drawn with the quickest possible hand on a white sheet of construction paper. A small typed note in the corner explained the artist's intentions. "I though this would be cheerier," it said.*

*Peterson sighed again. Everyone was a comedian.*

No criminal embodies the stereotypical lawbreaker better than the thief. Whether debonair and romantic or strung out and hustling, thieves occupy all corners of the underworld. Their sticky fingers find their way onto purses, billfolds, and priceless works of art. They live high on the hog, or hope to

score just enough to get that next shot of rye. Cunning or stupid, thrill seeker or canny engineer, they are at once the easiest criminal to become, and one of the hardest to truly master.

The reasons for stealing are myriad (and are dealt with in some detail starting on page 49), but they usually boil down to plain old fashioned greed. The thief steals something because he believes he can procure a great deal of money for it, or because he desires it and doesn't have the funds to pay for it. Compulsive theft (or kleptomania) is not uncommon, but its practitioners don't usually aspire to it as a lifestyle. Other thieves can be broken down into two categories: amateurs who do it to help fulfill some other need, and professionals who do it as a career choice. They are mainly separated by their approach to their victims.

Amateurs wait for a victim to come to them: seizing targets of opportunity and acting with little or no forethought. They react instead of act, their activity fueled by adrenaline and the need to live in the moment. For tools, they typically rely on nothing more complicated than a set of lock picks. Their crimes are quick, edgy, and filled with nervous energy. When something goes wrong, they usually head for the door, running as fast as they can and never looking back to check what they may have left behind.

Professionals, on the other hand, are never so cavalier. Their victims are carefully chosen, their crimes preceded by long hours of preparation. They study the scene and make notes about security, lighting, and possible exits. They gather equipment needed for the operation and establish a timetable of how long it will take them from start to finish. They try to anticipate possible complications ahead of time, and have a plan of action ready for when the unexpected crops up. The score is the primary goal for the professional — the money he makes is considered his source of income — and in pursuit of it, he will be as meticulous and detail-intensive as an engineer building a suspension bridge.

## TYPES OF THIEVES

Thieves can be divided into a variety of subcategories, the most prominent of which are dealt with below. Though some thieves occupy multiple subcategories (that is, their *modus operandi* isn't limited to a single type), many tend to favor one in particular, and remain with it throughout their career.

### ARMED ROBBERS

Armed robbers commit theft through intimidation, using a gun or a weapon to coerce the victim into handing over the goods. At the lowest levels, they are street hoods accosting passersby for wallets, purses, and watches. Higher up the ladder, one finds store bandits who demand the money from market cash registers, filling stations, and the like. The highest echelon includes bank robbers, armored car robbers, jewelry store robbers, and the like. The threat of violence is key to their activities; they confront their victims directly and

## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS

rely on fear or confusion to prevent anyone from fighting back. Armed robbers usually don't wish to harm anyone, but won't hesitate to do so if they feel it necessary. Of all the types of thief, they are the most likely to cause bloodshed in the course of their work. Almost all of them possess a high Moxie (the nerve required to stick a gun in someone's face is considerable), and if they wish to succeed at it for long, an equally high Brains score as well. Firearms proficiency is a necessary skill, as is the ability to quickly depart a crime scene (Athletics and/or Drive). Finally, an armed robber should possess a relatively high Intimidation score, to better persuade his victims to give up their hard-earned goods.

More on armed robberies can be found on page 40.

### BURGLARS

Burglars commit theft through stealth and guile. Unlike armed robbers, they eschew direct confrontation, preferring to do their job without their victims noticing. Their ranks include pickpockets and smash-and-grab artists at the lower end, all the way up to burglars of museums and high-security vaults. Their targets are no different than those of the armed robber; the only distinction comes in their methods. They base their activities around avoiding detection — entering the area unseen, gaining entry to what they need by disarming or overcoming any security devices, and leaving long before any attention comes their way. Accordingly, most burglars require a high Smoothness score to both move around quietly, and to dexterously manipulate lock picks, safe crackers, and other delicate devices. Naturally, high-ranking Stealth and Pick Lock skills are highly desirable, and a decent Sleight of Hand score may be required if the burglar conducts a lot of quick snatches in public. Contortions can also be used to help the burglar squeeze through any tight areas. Finally, an Appraise skill can help separate what's worth stealing from what's strictly for show, and an Engineering or Demolition skill may be useful during vault break-ins or other elaborate capers.

More on burglaries can be found on page 39.

### COUNTERFEITERS

Counterfeiters aren't strictly thieves, though their business can be construed as a form of theft. They make their living by creating forgeries and passing them off as the genuine article. Some sell phony pieces of jewelry or rare stamps. Others create fake currency, circulating it into the economy as genuine money. Anything worth any sort of money can be duplicated, so long as it fools someone into believing it's the genuine article. Some counterfeiters may be involved in more direct forms of theft, such as creating facsimiles of famous paintings which will be swapped with the original, but most see counterfeiting as an end unto itself. Their key ability is Smoothness, which is necessary to create a convincing forgery. Art forgers also require a high Brains, and a Lore skill in their chosen field, for that allows them to understand and emulate the original artist's technique.

More on counterfeiting can be found on page 43.

### JEWEL THIEVES AND ART THIEVES

This category technically includes both burglars and armed robbers, and can entail the use of counterfeiters as well. They specialize in stealing luxury items such as diamonds, furs, and expensive paintings. Such theft involves more risks than simply stealing money; stolen goods are harder to get rid of, and bulkier than cash as well. Jewel and art thieves must prepare themselves carefully, have a buyer or fence lined up ahead of time, and often overcome elaborate security measures if they wish to get away clean. A high Brains skill is essential in this regard, though a good Smoothness can help too. Thieves of this type must have a solid Appraise score as well, in order to determine the authenticity of the goods they are stealing. Finally, anyone involved in art theft must show considerable patience and willpower (Moxie), since successfully moving a stolen piece of art often takes years before a profit can be realized.

More on jewel and art theft can be found on page 41.

### STAKEHORSES AND FENCES

These are not strictly thieves themselves, but rather peripheral figures whose work is nonetheless essential for thievery to function.

A *stakehorse* is someone willing to bankroll a large theft. He pays for the equipment, training time, and the like in exchange for a cut of the profits. Stakehorses generally view theft as they would any other investment; they are paying now in order to see a return on their money in the future. Most never participate in the theft itself, though a few successful pros will occasionally bankroll their own operations. Stakehorses require little in the way of abilities; they need only a certain amount of cash to invest, and a willingness to keep their mouths shut.

A *fence* handles the goods after they have been stolen, exchanging them for cash or other mediums of exchange. Unless the thief is taking money directly, he will need a fence to turn what he takes into usable currency. *Amateur* or "lay" fences simply buy stolen goods for their own purposes, using them instead of passing them on to buyers. *Occasional* fences usually run legitimate businesses such as pawn shops, and only infrequently deal in stolen goods. A *professional* fence considers moving stolen goods his principle occupation, and uses legitimate businesses only as a front or cover. All three are a vital part of the economy of stolen goods, for without them, many thieves would have no way of truly profiting from the things they take. The only skill required for a fence is a high Appraisal, though the best have a good Brains score and a decent ranking in the appropriate Lore skill as well. Many fences are charming and flamboyant, which lets them hustle low prices out of sellers, and then market the same stolen goods for ten times what they paid for them. Though not entirely necessary for their career, a high Moxie score can make their lives a lot easier.

More on fences and stakehorses can be found on page 38.



## HOW TO STEAL: THIEVERY 101

This section covers the basics of conducting theft. The first section deals with the methods of professional or full-time thieves, while the second handles amateurs or those who steal for more peripheral reasons. Different types and styles of theft are covered in the third section, followed by a discussion of the sorts of obstacles every thief can expect (and ways to overcome them).

### PROFESSIONALS

Regardless of whether it's a silent burglary in the dead of night, or a brazen bank robbery at high noon, all professional thieves use a similar methodology to secure their score. It begins when they first select a target to acquire and ends only when the goods are disposed of and the thief has gotten away clean.

#### 1) Preparation

Before the thief can even consider approaching the target, he has to develop a plan. This usually involves watching the area closely and learning everything he can about it. Traffic flow, the number of people in the vicinity, and easy entry/exit points are key. If he can, he checks out the electrical system for lights and alarms. Sewers or underground tunnels may provide access points as well. Security is of top concern. How many guards are on the premises? What are their shift times? Are there guard dogs or other deterrents?

The thief will also determine the location of the goods within the building, and how they can be most expediently moved. He studies architectural diagrams, police reports, and anything he can get his hands on that might provide useful information. He takes pictures. He watches traffic flow. From this analysis, he decides if the risk involved is worth the reward, and develops a plan on how best to proceed.

If possible, a thief will go undercover at the target location, to get an inside view of the building. Janitors and cleaning women are rarely noticed, and can examine maintenance tunnels and access hatches without being seen. Sometimes a thief need only appear in a set of coveralls and will immediately be dismissed as a member of the cleaning crew. Other times, a more formal employment is required (which is why the police often check recent hirings when investigating a theft). In these cases, a thief will join the staff a few months ahead of time, familiarize himself with the essentials of the building, and then remain working for some time afterwards until the

heat cools down before quietly quitting. In robberies involving a bank or a large corporation, this can be the perfect way to prepare for the job.

Prep work usually requires funds: an investment in the theft before it can be undertaken. Professionals will sometimes have such funds set aside, both to procure the necessary equipment, and to pay off any accomplices. If they don't, then they must find a stakehorse of some sort: a corrupt businessman or loan shark willing to front the money in exchange for a cut. This is where organized crime enters into professional theft; mob syndicates will bankroll a "project" in exchange for usurious interest rates and/or a whopping percentage of the take. Long-time thieves work hard to bankroll their own scores rather than deal with such entanglements.

#### 2) Entry/Acquisition

With the plan in place, the thief then goes about executing it. His first task is entry into the building or location. Whether by stealth or brashness, through hidden movement, disguise, or simply a very large gun, the thief passes through any initial barriers or obstacles. Once inside, he makes his way to the target, disabling any locks, alarms, or other security devices along the way. When the target is reached, it needs to be placed in a safe container and kept intact until the getaway is complete.

Generally, this aspect of the theft is most susceptible to unforeseen circumstances. Zealous guards, power fluctuations in the alarm circuits, nosy customers arriving at the wrong time, and the like can all conspire to derail the theft in progress. This is why preplanning is so important to professionals, and why any thief worth his salt will anticipate as many contingencies as he can before committing to the theft.

#### 3) Exiting

Once the prize has been acquired, the next step is getting out of the building and clear of any arriving authorities. Every good thief will have an exit strategy plotted out, and several back-up routes at his fingertips should the situation warrant. The manner of the exit depends on whether the thief has been detected, and any remaining obstacles in his path (usually dogs, security guards, or the like). If he hasn't been detected, then stealth and discretion are paramount to a successful exit. The object is to escape without being noticed... even if it takes an inordinate amount of time. A good burglar may spend hours crawling up a narrow shaft or through a hidden tunnel just to make sure he leaves no evidence behind. By the time the theft is discovered, the burglar should be far away and well out of the line of fire.

On the other hand, if the thief has been detected (sometimes deliberately, as in the case of an armed robbery), speed is of primary importance. The thief must exit the premises as quickly as possible, and ensure that he isn't pursued when he leaves. Reliable transportation plays a key role in this case. Armed robbers will often steal cars for their getaway, and then abandon them at a prearranged point. Multiple cars may be used to avoid detection, and if the theft involved a group of criminals, they will split up and head in different directions, rendezvousing later on to divide the spoils.



## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS



### 4) Staying Clear of the Law

Assuming the thief escapes the crime scene successfully, the next step is to ensure that he cannot be traced back to the theft. The determining factors have usually come and gone by this point — lying in the thief's approach, his care at leaving any evidence behind, and the manner of his escape. A robbery in which something unexpected occurred is more likely to leave some trail behind than one which went entirely according to plan. Similarly, a hasty or ill-conceived escape will leave definite clues for police to follow, while a smooth getaway allows the robber to vanish without a trace.

Regardless of mitigating factors, however, the thief must now lie low until the heat over the robbery has died down. The police will be searching for a suspect, and wealthy victims may hire detectives or other private interests to hunt them down as well. The more innocuous and unnoticeable the thief appears, the more likely he is to be overlooked. In some cases, this means literally holing up: finding a remote or secure area, and rarely venturing out save in the most dire emergencies. In other cases, it means acting normally: showing up for work

and going about the same routine as before the robbery. The thief should have a good alibi for the time of the robbery, and commit a back-story to memory. Should the police ever show up at the door, he must do all he can to assuage their suspicion; the more plausibly he can answer their questions, the better off he'll be.

As to the money or valuables acquired in the theft, they too must lie low until it becomes safe to spend them. If cash was taken, it can be split among the principles readily enough, but it can't be spent in any copious amounts; sudden luxury items like cars or boats are an instant tip-off to the police, and a criminal who shows up in an expensive new suit days after a big score will alert every informant in the city. Most of the time, the loot simply sits somewhere safe, though if the thief is lucky, he has some means of laundering it before he deigns to spend it. Artwork, too, must often remain hidden — sometimes for years — before its wealth can be realized. Diamonds and jewelry need not wait that long, but must still either pass through an unscrupulous merchant or wait until the theft is put on the back burner and the police have moved on to more pressing crimes.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## 5) Pay-Off

Once things have cooled down, the thief can then finally realize the fruits of his labor. Cash can be spent and invested easily, of course, but material goods require a more complicated procedure. Here is where the fence earns his keep. He will buy stolen goods (often at a fraction of their actual price) in exchange for cash, thus providing the thief with a speedy

return on his investment. The fence can then sell the goods to another buyer at a mark-up, guaranteeing himself a tidy profit. Thefts or robberies with a large pay-out often have fences set up ahead of time, prepared to receive the goods and pay the robbers off. Sometimes, fences will simply act as mediators, setting up a quick sale with an interested buyer and collecting a commission for their services. Whatever the case, their appearance marks the conclusion of the theft, as the goods are now dispersed and the culprit is free to spend his money

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD FENCE?

Fences are movers and shakers in the criminal underworld. Their crimes are usually fairly minor (receiving stolen property is the usual charge, a comparatively light infraction that is often difficult to prove), and yet they have contacts with all manner of more “serious” criminals. Trafficking in stolen goods affects thieves, smugglers, money launderers, and mobsters. It provides a steady flow of cash for comparatively little risk, and if the fence is arrested, it may even provide a boon for him — a form of “free advertising” to establish his credentials in the underworld.

For a fence to succeed, he must first have knowledge of the goods in which he deals. A specialty in, say, diamonds or rare art may be desirable (to better gauge the object’s worth), but many fences cast their net much wider, understanding a little about a lot of different items. The more a fence can diversify, the more items he can successfully handle, and the better his business will do.

Secondly, he must have a variety of contacts in the criminal underworld, willing to both sell goods to him, and purchase goods from him. Most fences adopt a “no questions asked” policy towards their clients as a necessity, but they still pick up enough to get a feel for their clients’ business. How else would a fence know who’s on the lookout for a truckload full of radios, or who will take stolen bearer bonds, but not stolen liquor? A strong feel for the underworld — and the means to manipulate the ebbs and flows of its economy — ensures success as a fence.

Finally, fences must be able to disguise their operations as a legitimate transaction. Though they often have a very public reputation (necessary to facilitate their business), they must also have ways of hiding it from the authorities. They accomplish this by dancing around the edges of legality, constantly occupying that nebulous gray zone between right and wrong. Their “straight” business serves to mask their traffic in stolen goods; a pawnshop, for example, makes a great front for a fence, since it involves a lot of perfectly legal exchanges of goods. Higher up the totem pole, rich fences often appear as stock brokers or real estate magnates shifting stolen funds behind above-board investments. The resulting confusion makes prosecuting them a difficult and time-consuming endeavor, one which even police aware of such activities are reluctant to spend precious resources on.

## AMATEURS

Amateur thievery is generally categorized as any kind of theft occurring with little or no preparation. Amateurs generally prefer targets of opportunity — those who cross their line of sight, or who look promising from a cursory glance — and the elaborate structure to which professionals cling is nowhere to be seen. In its place is a severely truncated and fast-paced approach, governed less by tactical calculation than by a rush of adrenaline and the ability to take victims by surprise. A typical amateur theft encompasses three distinct stages, all of which take place quickly.

### 1) Spotting a Target

Whether he goes out looking for an opportunity, or simply decides on the spur of the moment to take one, the amateur thief rarely engages in any serious preplanning. Consequently, he tends to act upon surface details and expects the score to be fast and easy. Amateurs target victims with obvious displays of wealth (fine clothes, a nice car, flashy money, or the like), or businesses where money can be easily and quickly obtained (anywhere with a cash register up front). Houses with darkened windows make tempting targets, as do residences where the thief can see the owner leaving. Many thieves can transform these instincts into a street-level cunning, noticing and even anticipating likely victims with a predator’s ease. Even those who act rashly, however, *never* act unless they are sure that it will pay off. For example, they won’t break into random buildings in hopes of scoring some quick cash, or roll a homeless person for the contents of his wallet. Only the most desperate thieves (usually junkies in search of their next hit) ever consider such tactics, and most get nothing for their efforts. The art of spotting an opportunity means making sure that the effort will pay off.

### 2) Acting

Once a target has been determined, the thief will pick the best moment to act. That usually means waiting until witnesses are at a minimum (for example, the target moves down an abandoned street, or the store empties of customers for a time), and other risks are considered in hand. He can’t wait too long however, or the chance to act will vanish. When he does act, it tends to be very rapid: get to the valuables, secure them, and get out as quickly as possible. Armed robbers rely heavily on intimidation, threatening grievous bodily harm if the victims don’t move quickly. Burglars take a more relaxed pace, but still rely on being able to pick a lock quickly, or else simply toss a brick through a window to gain access.

## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS

In these instances, a stubborn obstacle can prove the thief's undoing. If a lock can't be quickly picked or broken, if a victim isn't quickly cowed or presents a threat, or if the expected goods are well hidden or otherwise rendered inaccessible, then the thief may decide that it's too much effort and head for the exit. Again, a good amateur excels at spotting telltale signs of trouble, and moving to another target rather than risk a difficult entanglement

### 3) Exiting

Once he has what he needs, the amateur thief cares only about exiting the area as quickly as possible. If he can't get away on foot, he'll use a stolen car, or even one of his own if he's not thinking clearly. Hostages and other victims will be rendered incapable of calling for help, and if the police have been alerted, the thief will hide or flee rather than risk a confrontation. Elaborate escape plans usually don't enter into their thinking; they invariably take the most open route and hope for the best. Taxicabs are favored targets for amateur thieves precisely because they can escape so easily; simply tell the driver where to go and hop through the door. Others will use partners with running automobiles to make their escape, but that usually constitutes the limits of their planning. Most never consider anything beyond grabbing the goods and getting out the door.

Because amateur thieves pull down relatively small scores, there is little need to hold what they make until time has passed. Money comes in amounts too meager to draw much attention, and valuables are limited to what can be thrust into a pocket or crammed into a bag. Legitimate pawnshops will accept their goods with little fuss, and if caught, the thief faces much lighter penalties than his more organized cousin (who needs a big score to justify the time and effort).

Despite their cruder methods and sometimes wilder behavior, certain amateur thieves thrive at their chosen *modus operandi*. These criminals tend to be the most cunning and vicious in the underworld. They are constantly on the search for the next score, and while they rarely become rich, they have a rugged tenacity that allows them to last on the cold hard streets. They are often the most dangerous of any kind of thief, for while other amateurs act clumsily and professionals plan their capers too well to inflict much harm, these urban hunters will happily kill those who give them any trouble. Stints in prison only seem to harden them, and when they inevitably reach their end, it often comes with brutal finality, like a wild animal too dangerous keep alive.



## TYPES OF THEFT

Theft is generally divided between burglaries (which don't involve the threat of force) and armed robberies (which do). To them, we have added the theft of art and jewelry, which contains unique traits that bear discussion on their own terms, and counterfeiting, which is a form of theft by deception. Together, they encompass the overwhelming majority of criminal thievery. Each has its own set of conventions and rules, which make it distinct from other forms of theft.

### Burglaries

In strict legal terms, a burglary is the unlawful entry into a home or a place of business for the purpose to stealing valuables. For our purposes here, we have expanded the category to include any form of non-violent theft, from street level pick pocketing to breaking into a highly secure bank vault. As discussed earlier, its primary merits are secrecy and lack of direct contact with the victims. To achieve that, the burglar requires both time and the proper tools, as well as a clear notion of how he intends to enter and exit.

Most burglaries involve entry into a house, business, or other building. The thief must enter the premises, maneuver through the rooms and corridors until he reaches his prize, and procure it without raising alarm. Private homes can often be breached through something as simple as smashing a window with a rock. Public institutions like museums, and businesses such as banks, have much more elaborate protections, and require more preparation.

Rooftop entryways such as skylights are a preferred method of entry if the building facilitates it. Not only are they less likely to be guarded, but they afford the thief a clear view of the room beneath. They also provide a rapid means of exit that doesn't entail braving an outside door and possible perimeter alarm. Similarly, tunneling underneath a structure allows the burglar to work without drawing attention, and can be especially effective when breaking into vaults (whose floors are often less secure than its doors or walls). Tunnels can also connect up to local sewer or subway systems, masking the burglar's escape when he makes off with the goods. The only drawback is the effort involved, which often requires several men and a building layout conducive to entry from below.

Particularly daring burglars will use deception and disguise to reach their goals. Prep work sometimes entails disguising oneself as an employee — a janitor or similar occupation — which can be further developed into an elaborate ruse designed to gain entry with a minimum of difficulty. The thief might appear as security personnel, for example: here to test the building's defenses or to install a lock. Or he might pass himself off as a high-ranking official for the business in question — one who presumably has access to the building's valuables. Such operations are quite risky, but also eliminate coordination issues and bulky equipment. They often take on the aspects of a con, requiring the thief to come up with a convincing back story and props such as official documents or uniforms. Such burglaries often remove the valuables from right under their owners' noses, allowing the thief to basically walk through the front doors in broad daylight.



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Burglars tend to operate in smaller groups than armed robbers. Ideally, a burglar will conduct his operations solo, especially if he's done his homework well. Lone thieves are much less apt to draw attention to themselves, and can work much more quietly than a group. When more than one person is required, the groups tend to be small and very specialized: a box-man to handle the locks, an electrician to cut the alarms, a driver to ensure a speedy getaway, and so on. If one person can do more than one job, so much the better. And of course, the fewer people you have, the less the pay-off has to be divided.

Burglars depend heavily on their equipment, putting great trust in the chisels, lock-picks, wire-cutters and the like to conduct a successful theft. Again, simpler tools are preferable if it is at all possible. A set of lock-picks — easily concealed in a back pocket — is much easier to carry about than a power drill or blowtorch. The thief who can get in and out using no tools whatsoever is truly a master. Clothes are important as well, and a burglar's "uniform" speaks volumes about how seriously he takes his work. The stereotypical black outfit is not uncommon, since it makes the burglar hard to spot in the dark, but some thieves prefer to wear janitor's coveralls, or similarly innocuous clothes that let them blend in with a crowd. Masks and hoods, too, are worn less often than the average citizen thinks, since they tend to draw attention to themselves, and can also impede the burglar's field of vision. If the burglar

does his job correctly, no one will ever get close enough to identify him anyway. The only piece of clothing which remains fairly inviolate is footwear; burglars always wear comfortable shoes such as sneakers, which make very little noise and allow for all manner of strenuous activity.

## Armed Robberies

Armed robberies differ from burglaries in that weapons or the threat of force is used — changing the theft from one of stealth and guile to one of extortion. Because of that, a robber's approach and techniques differ wildly from the more sedate burglar, and their *modus operandi* demands a more rigorous discipline.

Though armed robbers can act alone, their targets are limited if they do so. They must focus on a set number of victims. Late night diners and all-night stores are their usual targets — somewhere with just a tiny handful of employees who can be easily contained. The robber can demand the valuables in the safe, display case, or cash register quickly, keep the employees at bay, and leave without difficulty. Lone robbers who take down banks will approach just a single teller, keeping their presence as quiet as possible. They will flash their weapon (or just verbally threaten the teller), request that the funds in his or her drawer be emptied into a bag, and then flee as quickly as possible. The remainder of the bank's money is

## SHOPLIFTERS AND PICKPOCKETS

Again, for purposes of this discussion, shoplifting and pickpocketing are considered a form of burglary... though any true professional would be horrified at the association. They are street-level crimes, focused on targets of opportunity and small-time scores. Even smash-and-grab burglaries — accomplished with little forethought and concentrating on low-risk targets like middle-class houses — rank above such activities in the criminal hierarchy.

Shoplifting and pickpocketing both rely on similar tactics to accomplish their goals. The shoplifter seeks out a store which is large and well stocked — somewhere with lots of aisles for the owner to keep track of and which won't raise flags if a few items going missing. A crowded store is preferable as well, since it further masks the shoplifter's activities. Most shoplifters will work sometime in the middle of the day; storekeepers are more wary while opening and closing, and there tends to be fewer customers there as well.

Similarly, pickpockets will single out victims who appear prosperous or distracted: good clothes and wallets or valuables being handled carelessly are strong signals to them. They prefer public places, using large thoroughfares and places like train stations to blend in with the crowd.

Both types of criminals rely upon well-worn techniques to do their work. Diversions are a staple of both shoplifting and pickpocketing, providing a distraction at a key moment. Such cases often involve an accomplice, who creates a scene at a specific point to allow his partner to make off with the goods. Accomplices can also be used to hand off the stolen items once the theft is complete, hiding it in their own pockets or in a bag of already-purchased goods.

Professional shoplifters or pickpockets tend to steal specific items; their crimes are less random than their more disorganized counterparts. Like thieves higher up the criminal ladder, they will prepare for their targets, carefully noting the movement of employees through the store or the rich man's path from the subway entrance to his office. Exit routes are charted and the distraction (if used) is carefully rehearsed ahead of time. This type of thief rarely bothers with targets of opportunity; if he came to steal a radio and he has the chance to swipe a candy bar, he'll ignore it in favor of his primary objective. And of course, he always operates a good distance from his home or regular haunt; it is imperative that no one recognize him while he's working.

The pay-offs for shoplifting and pick pocketing are notoriously low. Occasionally, a fancy watch or wallet bursting with cash will pop up, but most of the time, the score is whatever the local pawnshop dealer is willing to pay. Most professionals have a long arrest sheet as well: it's easier to get caught when you work a lot of small jobs instead of one large one. Sentences are usually light, but few thieves ever get rich practicing this form of larceny. The best move up to bigger and more impressive scores. Those who don't stay mired in the underworld's lowest echelons: small timers until the day they die.

## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS

left untouched — too big a target for just one man. Most robberies worth the effort require a small team of people, working in tandem to secure the target.

The heart of an armed robbery entails two distinct elements. *Crowd control* means handling any employees or customers at the site — neutralizing them as potential threats and preventing them from leaving until the robbers' work is done. Few skills are required for this beyond the ability to intimidate and perhaps a knack for firearms. *Acquisition* means taking the valuables themselves from the safe, vault, display case, teller's booth, etc. If it means breaching a door or the like, a safecracker or similar expert may be required; however, if one of the hostages can bypass the security measures, then the robber need only be intimidating enough to convince him. Working at both crowd control and acquisition at once is no mean feat, though it can be accomplished if the robber(s) can seal the crowd up somewhere.

In addition to these basic duties, many armed robbers bring along a driver, since it facilitates a speedy getaway. Most drivers remain in the vehicle during the robbery rather than entering the building itself. There, they can watch the streets for approaching traffic, or even monitor the police chatter if they're lucky enough to have a radio. Depending upon the details, a robbery may require other specialized participants as well: an inside man to determine key details, an electrician to short out lights or alarms, or a "scout" who enters the building first to determine if anything unexpected has cropped up.

Entry into the building can be either subtle or direct. Robbers looking to avoid attention early will filter in one at a time, often posing as customers or the like. They will don masks and gloves only when everyone is in place, and the signal is given to begin the robbery. On the other hand, those hoping to shock and surprise their victims will enter in a group, rounding up customers and employees as quickly as possible. Confusion and fear serve the robbers well in this scenario, letting them overwhelm any potential opposition and render their victims docile. Well-prepared robbers will focus on the most valuable prizes first — usually held in a vault or similarly secure location. Those more interested in speed will focus on the fastest and easiest targets: smashing displays cases, raiding the tellers' drawers and the like. Any amount of preparation usually involves a timetable, covering how many minutes they can remain on site before they must flee. When the timetable is up, the robbers exit the premises, regardless of how much loot they have secured.

Equipment is much more limited for armed robberies than for burglaries — functioning firearms, bags to hold the loot, and a mask and gloves to conceal the robber's identity are really all that is required. Masks are much more important for armed robbers than for burglars; since they will be facing their victims directly, they need to make sure no one can identify them. Once the robbers have escaped the area, their first concern is to dispose of any incriminating evidence for precisely this reason. Clothes will be burned, guns dismantled or disposed of, even the getaway car will be abandoned if possible. Everything they keep with them is a link tying them back to the robbery; the more they can eliminate, the less chance the police have of catching up to them.

Despite their imposing *modus operandi*, most professionals disdain the use of direct violence... though they will resort to it if they feel it necessary. To them, getting the money is their central purpose; actually harming their victims wastes time and energy, and could spell longer prison sentences if they get caught. "Cowboys" who shoot their way through robberies or display little concern for their victims' lives are apt to cause a panic, making it more difficult to control a crowd. Someone who might otherwise sit quietly and do whatever the robber says may instead blindly lash out, or stampede shrieking towards the exit — something no self-respecting robber wants. Those with a penchant for unnecessary violence find themselves shunned by their comrades... or shot down by the police like a mad dog.

Stores and banks constitute the primary targets for an armed robbery. Small-time robbers will target the cash register, and perhaps the safe on premises, while those looking for a big score will focus on jewelry stores and banks, which often provide a high yield of loot. Armored cars make tempting targets too, though they require a different approach (see the sidebar on the following page for details). "Home invasions" — among the most vicious of armed robberies — are on the rise in the U.C., especially in cities like Terminus where law enforcement is wavering. The robbers will enter a private home and hold the family at gunpoint while they loot the premises of anything valuable. High-end professionals almost never conduct home invasions; the pay off is too low and the risks are too great. It's left largely to thrill-seekers and petty criminals with the requisite mean streak.

Whatever the target, the professional robber tries to limit his exposure and get through the act as quickly as possible. A high pay-off means the thief need not engage in as many robberies, which reduces the risk of capture considerably. Career robbers will engage in only a few scores every year, concentrating their resources and ensuring that everything goes right instead of spreading themselves across multiple thefts with lower yields. Because armed robbers expose themselves to their victims, and because their criminal activities are so high profile, they must be doubly sure that the risks they take are worth the reward

### Art Theft

As stated earlier, art theft can involve either a burglary or an armed robbery, but because of the goods being stolen, has its own unique set of traits which bear separate discussion.



## GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

The war which devastated the old world overseas had a marked impact on the U.C.'s art world. Priceless paintings and statuary were shipped to the Commonwealth for safekeeping, spared the devastation that was rapidly overtaking the continent across the ocean. Other works arrived as booty, filched from crumbling ruins by unscrupulous officers or flat-out thieves. By the time the war ended, the U.C. held more valuable artwork than the rest of the world combined... and with so many valuable pieces in such close proximity, it was only a matter of time before art thieves began to pick up the slack.

(In our own world, art theft was still relatively uncommon during the postwar period, and many museums didn't install advanced security devices until the early 1960s at the earliest. Thanks to the slight differences between *The Edge of Midnight's* universe and ours, museums have had to wise up much more quickly.)

More than any other valuables, stolen art requires a buyer before it is taken. Otherwise, the thief may have difficulty unloading it, and thus increase his chances of being caught. Art is readily identifiable, unlike money or even jewelry, and if a famous painting is stolen, every policeman in the country will

know exactly what it looks like. If he wishes to steal it, the thief must either know a buyer in advance, or make sure it is anonymous enough not to draw attention. (The latter case is fairly uncommon, since an unknown painting or sculpture is less likely to be worth very much.) In these cases, a good fence is invaluable. A fence can locate a buyer and set up the details of the transaction long before the theft takes place, then make the exchange quickly once the item is stolen. Without such preparation, the thief must sometimes wait years before he can safely sell his loot.

The market for stolen art supports a fair number of buyers. Ironically, it is the very act of theft that helps maintain the market's value, since the pool of objects is limited and anything taken from a given collection will likely need to be replaced with another (equally valuable) piece. Unscrupulous collectors will sometimes commission the theft of a particular piece to complete their collection (usually after failing to buy it legitimately). Other collectors will do so out of a selfish desire to keep a piece for themselves. Organized criminals take an interest in art as well, since they can stockpile it far more readily than other criminals and thus make more money off

### ARMORED CARS

Armored cars are tempting to rob because of the money they yield: often as much as a bank, depending on when it's taken. However, an armored car robbery carries its own set of risks, which must be carefully weighed before it can commence.

Private companies offer their armored car transportation services to banks and other businesses. Most carry three guards when making their rounds: two in the front seat and one in the rear of the car with the valuables. All of them are highly trained and often well-armed; handguns are standard issue and many guards carry shotguns as well. When a delivery is made, the guard in the passenger seat will move the cash or valuables. The guard inside the rear will open the door only once (to accept the loot), and then close the door and seal himself back in; this ensures that the remainder of the valuables within the car stay safe. The driver's role varies, depending on the company and the importance of the transfer. He may either wait behind the wheel or help the passenger guard transfer the money — usually standing between the car and the establishment, and keeping an eye on the surrounding area for signs of trouble.

Like any other robbery, an armored car heist requires preparation. Knowledge of the car's route is vital, as is a schedule of pick-ups and drop-offs. The ideal time for a robbery is either at the start of its run or the end of it; a car making drop-offs will be full of money at the beginning of the run, while a car making pick-ups will be full at the end of it. If the robbers are waiting for some particular valuable, then they can strike any time after it's placed in the car, but otherwise, they are denying themselves a bigger pay-off by striking a car in the middle of its run. Inside help is often necessary to procure the routes and times, though it can be obtained by careful observation. The passenger guard often watches for tailing automobiles and other suspicious signs, however.

Robberies conducted during the transfer itself need to be carefully timed, lest the guard in the back close the door and seal up the loot. Such robberies are predicated on speed, and usually aim to secure the door before it can shut. If the thieves cannot overcome the guards in that amount of time, then they will need to induce the inside man to open up — either by threatening his comrades (or perhaps an innocent bystander) or threatening to blow up the entire car. If the car is in motion during the robbery, then the criminals will definitely need some way to breach the door. They will also need to halt the car in some way — either by blocking it with an obstacle or somehow overturning it. Blowing the door open with explosives is possible, but it often takes time and there's no guarantee that some or all of the loot won't go up in smoke. Most thieves find it easier to simply threaten the guard with blowing the whole thing up, rather than actually doing the deed themselves.

Regardless of circumstances, all armored car robberies must be conducted quickly. They take place in public places (usually in the middle of the day), which means a lot of eyewitnesses and a rapid response time by the police. Any robbery lasting longer than five or ten minutes runs a strong risk of ending in arrest. Like other armed robberies, the thieves must have a rapid getaway planned, via a nearby car or similar means. The risk is often worth it, however. Yields for armored car robberies vary, but a full load can net \$50,000 or more: quite a bit in the *Edge of Midnight* universe.

## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS

of it once the heat dies down. If the piece is not well-known, it can easily be sold to a legitimate collector, who believes it comes from a legal source (possibly the artist himself). Finally, the thief may be able to sell it back to the original owner, who can collect the insurance money and thus make a profit on the entire affair.

The specifics of stealing a piece of art are the same as any other valuable. The thief may take it by stealth or force, utilizing the techniques discussed in “Burglaries” or “Armed Robberies” on the previous pages. The differences come mainly once the prize has been secured. The thief will need to disguise the piece somehow, either by covering it up or masking its appearance as something innocuous. It must also be protected from the elements. Paintings degrade over time — especially if they are kept in less than ideal conditions — while statues and vases are subject to nicks and chips. Rare books are especially delicate, as are stamps; their paper and ink can degrade rapidly in adverse conditions. Even rare coins will oxidize if left unattended. And any kind of damage to the art might leave clues behind once it's bought — caked-on dirt, for example, can be identified, as can fingerprint smudges and the like. Considering that the art must be moved from place to place — sometimes numerous times — and hidden for years before it can be sold, it behooves the wise thief to properly protect it.

Certain pieces of art have a great deal of interest to members of the Few. Art is one of the few links *The Edge of Midnight* universe has to its past. Experts can identify specific artists and the parameters of the movements in which they worked (Impressionism, for example, or Cubism), but know little about history or circumstance. Their lectures relate to form and content, and if hard-pressed they would confess that they “never thought about” the details surrounding a work's creation. As a consequence, members of the Few find artwork fascinating — as much for the questions it raises as for aesthetic value — and some have resorted to stealing pieces in order to study them more closely. Others will happily buy stolen works as part of their ongoing investigations... though only those with a great deal of money have the luxury of doing so. Of particular fascination will be those pieces which have crossed over from our world — locked up in hidden attics and storerooms, only to slip into the void and reemerge intact in *The Edge of Midnight* universe. Such pieces are often targeted for theft — for reasons not even the thief can truly articulate — and may even hold a few clues as to the origin of *The Edge of Midnight*.



### Counterfeiting and Forgery

Though not technically theft, counterfeiting follows the same basic parameters of “money for nothing.” It's defined as the act of copying or producing a facsimile for the purposes of distributing it for profit. In most cases, this means money, which is produced in the U.C. by the national government. Forging money is a time-consuming process, but if handled properly, can result in huge dividends for comparatively little risk.

Commonwealth money is produced on a unique form of paper: a cotton rag with a very specific texture. Tiny red and blue fibers are interwoven into the rag, and the bills are printed using a specific green ink which is illegal to possess outside of the national government. The engraving on each bill is extremely detailed, requiring great innovation to reproduce, and the National Mint in Nova Roma keeps the engravings used to print them under lock and key.

Despite that, enterprising criminals have been able to duplicate legal currency. To do so requires at least two engravings, matching each side of a given bill. Skilled counterfeiters can spend long hours chiseling such engravings, endeavoring to perfectly match the originals. Once that's done, printings can be made using inks and papers which reasonably match the real thing. A printing press must be used to stamp the currency; matching the pressure of a genuine press is tricky, and forgeries can sometimes be spotted by how deeply the ink is imprinted on the paper. Clever counterfeiters will artificially age the currency by crumbling it up, tearing off the edges, or even dropping it in muddy water. The wear and tear will help further disguise the imperfections.

Amateurs tend to create cheap counterfeits that pass only the barest inspection; they use tricks to offset this, such as passing the bills in crowded shops where the cashier won't check it too closely, or filtering them into a collection of genuine bills so they won't be noticed. More reliable counterfeiters will take greater steps to reproduce the bills accurately, priding themselves on the nuance and detail of their work. They often use papers and inks that are very close to those used by the National Mint, and in the boldest cases will even steal that material from the national government. Such thefts are a high priority for the NLEB, who will go to great lengths to apprehend the culprits before they can put their ill-got gains to use. But despite the danger, professionals who obtain these materials can produce bills virtually indistinguishable from the real thing.

Other counterfeiters will forge different forms of currency, such as checks, bonds, or money orders. These are often easier to reproduce than cash, and yet can net the criminal a comparable amount of money if played right. Forging such documents requires an original from which to work, and a specific source to cash once they're completed. Banks will grant loans or credit from phony bonds or stock certificates, and fake checks must be cashed in a similar manner. Smart counterfeiters spread such documents around a variety of sources, lest frequenting one establishment too often draw undue suspicion. The NLEB has a separate division to track “paper hangers” who ply fraudulent checks and bonds, and many local police departments do as well.



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Forgery plays a particularly key role in art theft, which can be more easily facilitated with a cunning copy (if no one believes a piece is missing, then no one will bother looking for it). The hazy memories of *The Edge of Midnight* universe mean that forged works of art are more easily passed as genuine, and unscrupulous artists can make a huge amount of money by copying paintings or statues slated for theft. Art forgeries rely upon duplicating the original artist's technique. Brush strokes, chisel marks, the type of paint used, the precise colors, and the nature of the canvas must all be taken into consideration. If it's an old work, then exposing it to heat or cold, undue moisture, or certain chemicals makes it look aged. All of which is fairly easy to achieve if the forger knows what he's doing. Rare coins are even easier to duplicate; the forger can simply blend gold or silver with less valuable metals, reproduce the engraving on the front and back, and facilitate the aging process through a number of fairly simple means. Coin collectors are difficult to fool, but the ease with which forgeries can be made is often enough to overcome their studious eyes.

Forging documents such as passports and bureaucratic papers is a trickier proposition, requiring specific paper and tools such as rubber stamps and particular types of ink. Counterfeiters often produce forged documents on commission, accepting large payments for fugitives on the run or those who need to bypass certain businesses or government offices. Though easier to process than counterfeit cash, the potential to make a mistake with a forged document is still high, and can be spotted more readily. Government officials and law enforcement figures scrutinize such documents closely, usually paying much more attention than harried storeowners. The same holds true for stamps: a vertical camera is required to photograph the original and engraving equipment must accurately reproduce it in a new form. Stamps have value only to certain collectors, who know what to look for when seeking the genuine article.

Counterfeiters tend to be very solitary figures, working alone and rarely fraternizing with their fellow criminals. The benefit of counterfeiting is that there is very little exposure until the document is circulated; the forgery process can be conducted in secret, and unless special materials are required, tracing them is nearly impossible. The danger comes when and if the forgeries are discovered; if they don't pass the first inspection, the perpetrator may be nabbed, and any accomplices can quickly be traced from there. The NLEB can operate very quietly as well, and sometimes spends years building a solid case. Often, the counterfeiters have no idea they are being watched until the Agency closes the net around them.

Despite that, counterfeiting is a fairly low-risk crime. There is little violence attached to it and the counterfeiter rarely exposes himself to the dangers that other criminals do. Sentences are comparatively light as well; the justice system regards forgery and counterfeiting as a much less heinous crime than armed robbery or similarly brutal acts. The only downside is that it's often a national-level crime, meaning that the criminal will be incarcerated in a national penitentiary instead of a local prison. Many counterfeiters see that as an acceptable risk, especially considering the benefits of their profession. After all, what's a few years in prison compared to the ability to make your own money whenever you like?

## SECURITY MEASURES AND OTHER OBSTRUCTIONS

The world of *The Edge of Midnight* has a technology level equal to the late 1940s, which means that many of the security measures we take for granted today do not exist. Indeed, in modern terms, most security is fairly primitive, which makes it much easier for an enterprising thief to succeed at his job. Below is a list of standard obstructions and security measures found in the U.C., including means which enterprising thieves use to get around them.

### Fences and Walls

Fences and walls guard the perimeter of buildings, impeding access into the property. Most fences in the *Edge of Midnight* universe are constructed of either wood or chain link, while walls are made of some form of stone or brick. Walls are the most difficult for the thief to breach. Drilling or digging underneath them is noisy and time-consuming, so most thieves prefer to scale them. Scaling a standard brick wall without a rope requires a Brawn + Athletics roll, TN 10. Use of a rope or climbing device lowers the TN to 5, while use of a ladder eliminates the need for a roll entirely.

Fences are infinitely preferable from a thief's perspective because they are more readily breached (either by scaling or cutting through). Wooden fences can be scaled the same way a wall can, or cut through using a saw or similar tool. Enterprising thieves can simply remove the nails holding the planks together and pull the planks away.

Chain link fences are easy to climb (Brawn + Athletics, TN 5 without a rope), but security conscious buildings will often top them with barbed wire: strung in rows of three and often angled outward at a 45-degree angle. Topping a barbed wire fence without first cutting through requires a Smoothness + Athletics, TN 13 roll. A critical failure means that the character is snagged in the barbed wire and suffers 1-2 points of vigor damage. Freeing someone caught in barbed wire requires a Smoothness + Athletics roll, at TN 5... or a caught character can simply yank himself free by suffering an additional 3-7 points of vigor damage (1d10/2 rounded up + 2).

Cutting through barbed wire from the top of a fence requires a Smoothness + Athletics roll, TN 8. Cutting through the chain link, however, is much easier (TN 3) and less conspicuous as well. Many thieves will cut the links attaching the fence at its metal support pole, allowing them to slip through without leaving an obvious sign of their passing. Detecting a fence cut in such a manner requires a Gut + Perception roll, TN 7.

### Bars

Bars can be placed around doors and windows, preventing an intruder from entering through them. Most in *The Edge of Midnight* universe are very simple, and can be bent back or cut with the proper tools. Crowbars can be used to bend bars back with a simple Brawn check (TN varies, but usually 8) or sawn through with a hacksaw. Some thieves will even use vehicle jacks to pry open bars by bracing the jack between them and ratcheting it up. Crossbars on the entryway can mitigate the damage somewhat, but even they can be removed or circumvented in much the same manner. The only drawback

## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS



to removing bars is that they often consume precious time and leave evidence of entry in their wake. They are intended primarily to slow a thief down, not provide the final word on protection.

### Locks, Safes, and Vaults

A stout lock is a persistent (and at times quite formidable) foe to any thief. Padlocks on gates and doors can delay a thief long enough to dissuade him, while vault locks and safes can prevent anyone from gaining access. Any crook worth his salt needs to know how to get around a lock.

Key-based locks can be picked, usually using a set of tools and the appropriate know-how. They operate on what is known as *pin tumbler*s — small drivers which are held in place by springs. The key depresses the drivers in a certain sequence, which turns the tumblers and allows the door to be opened. By picking the lock, the thief attempts to emulate this process by placing the right amount of pressure on the tumblers. That usually requires two tools: the pick itself and a tension tool. The tension tool puts pressure on the tumblers and allows them to be turned once the pick has done its job. The thief slides the pick into the lock, manipulates it to move the tumblers to their open position, and then uses the tension tool to turn the mechanism. Professional thieves tend to have well-crafted lock picks, though in the *Edge of Midnight* universe,

improvised tools can work in a pinch. The TN required to pick a lock varies depending upon its complexity and the manner of tools at hand; rules for doing so can be found in the *Edge of Midnight* core rulebook, page 24.

Safe doors and vault doors are considerably more of a challenge than standard pin tumbler locks. Unless the thief knows the combination, that part of the lock must be bypassed and the mechanism triggered some other way. Again, the time involved in prying a safe or vault open makes it cost prohibitive to most thieves. Given time and equipment, any lock can be forced (or indeed, the walls to a safe or vault tunneled through), but most thieves have a few hours at most to do their work.

Skilled thieves can open a safe or vault with a stethoscope or some other listening device. It allows them to hear the clicks of the locking mechanism as they slowly turn the dial. A knowledgeable safecracker can determine the combination based on the timber of those clicks and thus open the safe. Stethoscopes are also used in drilling, another key method of breaching stubborn barriers. The thief jiggles the safe handle while listening for the precise point where the bolt is located. He then drills a hole at that point. If the location is correct, the safe will open. Similar procedures can be used for vault doors, though vaults are considerably more formidable and may require much more extensive equipment.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

In some cases, breaching the door itself is easier than trying to bypass the lock. The thief can use a blowtorch or a high tensile steel saw to cut around the lock, punch a hole through the side of the safe, or tear the dial off and use a steel hole punch to remove the center spindle. All of these methods are noisy and require bulky equipment to effect. If the building has other occupants or the sound carries outside, someone is likely to be alerted. Some armed robbers cut the Gordian knot by simply having their victims open the doors for them, while burglars go to great lengths to anticipate how much time it will take to work the vault or safe. Finally, unless the thief knows the combination, he will almost certainly leave evidence of his passing, which will make it more difficult to avoid the authorities once the chase is on.

## Alarms

Burglar alarms are a relatively new innovation in *The Edge of Midnight*, and though widely used, they lack many of the hi-tech advantages of 21<sup>st</sup> century security systems. Light sensors, motion detectors, and similar hardware simply don't exist. Instead, most alarms operate on a simple electrical current, usually the same alternating current which supplies electricity to the rest of the building. The most advanced alarm systems include a direct current or a battery-powered current as well, which allows them to continue functioning if power is cut from the building.

A burglar alarm is actually a very simple device: a circuit, tied into the various entryways to the building, which detects if a door or window is opened. A *closed circuit system* runs a continuous circuit, which flows freely so long as the door or window remains closed (usually through contact points between the door or window and its frame). When someone opens it, the circuit is broken and the alarm is triggered. An *open circuit system* works in the opposite manner. A small button or similar trigger is built into the door/window frame. The closed door or window holds it down, preventing the circuit from being completed. When opened, the button flies up, allowing the circuit to be connected and triggering the alarm. Both systems can be rigged into other devices (such as picture frames or vault doors), and will trigger the alarm when those devices are tampered with. Both closed and open circuit systems have a control box affixed to the alarm, which prevents it from being shut off after the entry is closed again (otherwise, the burglar could silence the alarm by simply shutting the door). Control boxes usually operate on their own power supply, and can't normally be shut off by tampering with the alarm's supply.

With this basic format established, security firms in the U.C. are making great innovations in how it is applied. Windows, for example, can be rigged to trigger the alarm if the glass itself is broken, not just if the window is raised. (A piece of foil wire is affixed to the surface of the glass; when the glass is cut or broken, the circuit is disrupted, and the alarm sounds.) Floor mats, too, can be rigged with pressure sensors. A layer of metal is placed on the bottom of the mat, with another layer placed on the floor beneath it. A brief space between the two keeps them from touching. When someone steps on the pad, the pressure forces the two layers together, the circuit is completed, and the alarm goes off.

Standard alarm systems emit a loud bell sound, which alerts guards or neighbors that an intruder has been detected, and also helps drive the intruder away. More expensive models include lighting systems designed to flash police-like strobes or bathe a given area in a blinding spotlight. The most sophisticated systems in the U.C. include telephone auto-dialers, which call up the local police station and play a prerecorded message informing them of the address and presumed break-in. The auto dialer is often on a loop, so the same message plays over and over again until someone shuts the system down. Auto dialers can also be used to alert remote guard posts, or private security firms in the building's employ.

So how does the enterprising thief shut this down? The best way to overcome an alarm is simply not to trigger it in the first place. Thieves can do this by avoiding entryways rigged with the alarm, or finding alternate means of breaching the building. The aforementioned skylight is a strong example of this; other buildings have little-known entrances to the sewer or another underground system which can be used to circumvent a perimeter of alarms.

In addition, a thief can disable or deactivate an alarm before he triggers it — either by disabling the circuit or making sure it isn't broken. Sophisticated thieves will know what kind of system is in place, and enter in such a manner that keeps the circuit intact. Some alarms can be circumvented by sliding a metal sheet under the door. Most can be shut off at the source: the power can be cut or a key can deactivate the alarm for use during the daylight hours. A thief can snip the electrical cables leading into the building, though if the alarm has a back-up system, it may require a bit more effort. If he knows where the alarm is ahead of time, he can enter quickly, locate the alarm, and disconnect it from its batteries before anyone is alerted. Cutting the phone lines will prevent the auto dialer from functioning, and even if the alarm is activated, a little pre-entry sabotage can prevent the bell or siren from going off.

Armed robbers utilize far less subtle tactics than these. By coercing whoever has access, they can either prevent the alarm from being activated or have it dismissed as an accident (a phone call to the police from the right person will work wonders). They don't require the know-how to manipulate the alarm system in general, though they must still be aware of where the alarms are located and how they are set off. Hidden switches and panic buttons can activate the alarm without their knowledge, and silent alarms, though fairly rare, can summon the police without anything appearing to be amiss. A canny armed robber will have all of the alarm triggers mapped out before he makes his move, and will make sure his victims cooperate in helping him get past them.

Setting up a simple alarm system requires a Brains + Engineering roll, TN 8, and about one hour's worth of time. Circumventing it requires another Brains + Engineering roll, TN 8. The more elaborate the system, the harder it is to circumvent. For each additional two hours (and whatever funds the alarm company chooses to charge) spent installing an alarm, the TN to circumvent it increases by +1 (up to a maximum of

## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS

+4 for private residences, +7 for banks and other institutions). The Brains + Engineering roll to set up an elaborate system is always TN 10, regardless of how much more difficult it is to get around. (This process is not considered a contested roll, because alarm systems are usually set up in a standard way, which the installer's finesse can't normally improve upon; the thief therefore bases his roll against the standard, not the installer. The GM can alter that in the cases of special installations if he wishes.)

### Guards

Regardless of the technology, few security measures can beat simple security guards around and within the building. A guard can respond to intrusion, alert the police, fight back if attacked, and do countless other things which no machine can hope to duplicate. Dogs have been used as guards since the dawn of civilization, since their sense of hearing and smell is far keener than any human's. More than any other obstacle, a guard stands the best chance of halting a thief in his tracks.

Dealing with guards involves one of two tactics: don't alert them or incapacitate them. Keeping guards in the dark about your presence means slipping past them unnoticed and going about your work quietly — a difficult feat if one must breach a safe or move anything heavy. There are no security cameras in *The Edge of Midnight*, so the guards are unable to be everywhere at once. Instead, they typically walk revolving perimeters, checking in on any key locations and watching for trouble. Other guards will be posted at a centralized location, usually the front door or entryway. Evading them means learning their routines and calculating how long they take between circuits. Such a timetable will be vital to conducting the theft successfully, though God help you if a guard decides to deviate from his routine. Finally, evading the guards means leaving no incriminating evidence for them to stumble across. The thief must take all of his tools and equipment with him, as well as leaving safe doors and other barriers with an untouched appearance. If this isn't possible, then he needs to calculate how long it will take for the guards to notice such details, and plan to be well clear of the area before they raise the alarm.

Incapacitating the guards is a much more direct — though not necessarily easier — proposition. Their number and patrol patterns must still be calculated, lest one be overlooked and left free to cause problems. The thief must gauge their armaments and training to determine how much of a threat they pose, as well as their ability to call for help if trouble arrives.





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Cutting the phone lines to the outside is usually sufficient, though some guards make use of bulky war surplus walkie-talkies to communicate with back-ups. Speed and stealth are of the essence when incapacitating guards; no thief wants to engage in an extended firefight, and the faster a guard is taken out of the equation, the less chance he has of fighting back.

Dogs pose a different sort of challenge. They cannot be reasoned or negotiated with the way human guards can, but they can also be dispatched more easily, or bribed off with meat. Doping ground beef with sedatives can effectively deal with all but the most well trained dogs, and chemical deterrents such as tear gas can prevent them from attacking. (Stats for guard dogs can be found in the Appendix on page 175.)

Regardless of the difficulties involved, incapacitating the guards frees up both time and options for the thief. He can work on breaching any further security devices without looking over his shoulder, and make his getaway without being pursued or harassed. The only drawbacks involve long-term issues; a guard who sees the thief can later report his appearance to the police, and living witnesses mean more clues for the authorities to follow. Many burglars blanch at murdering someone in cold blood, if for no other reason than the increased prison sentence such an act would mean. And some thieves pride themselves on slipping past the guards and doing their work invisibly rather than charging in like a bull in a china shop. Whatever their technique, thieves who have a solid means of neutralizing the guards have solved one of the biggest problems facing any successful theft.

## Loot

Finally, when all else fails, the loot itself can be used to deter or identify thieves. Dye packs do not yet exist, but small explosive devices can sometimes be planted in piles of money, designed to detonate if the cash is moved. They rarely cause much damage, but can burn and singe the bills to make them easily identifiable. Many banks also hand out currency with sequentially numbered bills, so that a thief who takes a number of them and spends them in one place may be tracked if he tries to spend them. (Obviously,

this method is preferred because it doesn't destroy the cash.) Forgeries can also be used to thwart thieves. Jewelers, for example, will sometimes stock their safes with convincing glass fakes while concealing the real valuables under a floorboard or another innocuous location. The same tactic can be used with counterfeit bills, phony silverware, and even paintings; museums have been known to display cunning forgeries rather than the genuine article, allowing only staff members or researchers to view the real painting.

Such tactics are effective because the thief rarely becomes aware of the ruse until he has taken the loot. The only preventative measure is not to fall for it in the first place, but unless



## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS

the thief is aware of the deception beforehand or has a good enough eye to spot the forgeries on the fly, he'll simply take what he assumes to be the valuables and render all of his careful efforts meaningless.

No security measure is perfect, and so long as there are valuables to be had, thieves will continue to find ways around their safeguards. The typical tactic of such measures is less to flat-out prevent the theft than to delay the time required to conduct it, or make the difficulty of getting to the valuables more than the pay-off of a successful heist is worth. With enough patience and energy, any barrier can be overcome... and there will always be criminals who consider it their calling to find newer, faster, and more effective ways to get what they want.

### ROLE-PLAYING THIEVES

This section covers playing thieves as player characters in *The Edge of Midnight*, and developing scenarios based around various forms of robbery.

#### MOTIVE

Motive to steal is the primary driving force behind a thieving character. Theoretically, anyone can be a thief if circumstances permit. Professionals do it as a form of making a living, while others do it through desperation or psychological compulsion. Every thief has his own reason for doing what he does, but most motives can be boiled down to three basic categories:

##### 1) Compulsion

Some thieves are compelled to steal by desires or impulses beyond their rational ken. They don't steal for monetary gain or to fulfill some other tangible desire. They steal because they *need* to steal: for the thrill of committing the act itself or in response to urges that they cannot entirely control. *Kleptomania* is the clinical condition for those who steal for no reason, but they actually make up a very small portion of this category. The vast majority are *addictive-compulsive* thieves, who steal for very different reasons. Addictive-compulsives act out of repressed anger, trying to "make things right" or vent their frustration. Their ranks include teenagers who steal on a dare and similar types. They become addicted to the thrill of stealing and often do it even when they don't need it. However, they will make use of the items they steal... unlike kleptomaniacs, who act out of no specific urge and will often take items they



have no use for whatsoever. Kleptomaniacs often feel very little guilt about their theft, while addictive compulsives often try to make amends somehow — either by giving the stolen object to someone else, or surreptitiously returning it to the store.

Regardless of their mental state, compulsive thieves rarely last as long as professionals. Their behavior is often poorly planned and erratic, consisting of little more than smash-and-grab tactics. Because they put so little thought into their activities, they are frequently caught, and the police make little distinction between compulsives and other types of thieves. However, certain professional thieves had their beginnings with compulsive behavior, and were clever enough to avoid getting caught. These characters live for the addiction of stealing, but have the foresight to plan for it accordingly. They rarely take down big scores, but their smaller boosts can make them a decent living... provided they keep their impulses under control. Stealing becomes a way of life for these few, rather than a problem to be overcome as it is for other compulsives.

##### 2) Debt or Desire

This type of thief acts out of economic necessity. He steals because it allows him to survive: to buy food, pay his rent, or the like. It also includes drug addicts who steal to feed their habit, debtors who must pay off large bills, or those who want something and simply can't afford to buy it on their own. Stealing is a means to an end for this type of thief; they do it to serve some other goal, and indeed may not consider themselves thieves at all. Their activities are limited to a few opportunistic scores, designed to get what they need and nothing more. If they steal over long periods of time, it's because they know of no other way to make ends meet, viewing it as the only recourse in a harsh world. Which isn't to say they're not capable of big scores. A gambler deep in debt may have to pull off a colossal burglary in order to clear his creditors, or a junkie with a flash of inspiration may corner enough bread to keep him in dope for years.

The only difference between debtors and other types of thieves is that they steal due to circumstance; fate forces them to take what they need and they deny that they had any choice in the matter. Because of that, their behavior can appear compulsive at times, and they may enter into schemes without properly thinking them through (though not to the extent that compulsives do). While they may display a modicum of planning, they often overlook key details, failing to consider factors that more experienced thieves take for granted. When the time comes to commit the robbery, they are often jittery and nervous, making mistakes even if they plan things out in advance. Of course, some are extremely cool under fire, and can pull off a robbery with the skill of any professional. In general, however, their lack of experience singles them out as dilettantes at best... which, like compulsives, makes them more likely to be caught by the police.

Very few debtors would describe themselves as thieves. Many of them look back on their behavior with a guilty conscience, and some try to make amends if their circumstances ever permit it. Their thievery is an episode in their life rather than a part of their identity, and if they ever pull themselves out

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

of trouble, they can easily turn their back on such activity. Of course, quite a few of them never reach that coveted position — they're always short of funds to pay for their necessities or they climb out of debt only to fall right back into it again. But their urge to move beyond all that and their reluctance to engage in theft except as a necessity colors their *modus operandi*, setting them apart from other types of thieves.

## 3) Profit

One motive and one motive alone drives a professional thief. He steals because he can make money at it as a self-supporting endeavor. Ironically, profit-driven thieves conduct fewer robberies than other types of thieves. They weigh the risks and act only when there's enough money at stake to offset them. (Those who don't tend to be young and get caught very quickly, forcing them to act more prudently if they wish to stay in business.)

Profit-driven thieves sometimes strike at targets of opportunity, responding to a situation when it crops up. More often, however, they will select their targets carefully; of all the types listed here, they are the most likely to pre-plan their scores, acting only when they feel the situation suits them best. They will often seek out the most lucrative targets — places with large sums of money close at hand — or else have fences and pawnbrokers set up to give them a quick return on their investment. They also tend to have very long-term outlooks, seeing their jobs as one-year or five-year commitments, instead of the immediate gratification which influences debt-driven thieves.

Like any other career, this type of thief takes pride in his work. He'll eschew penny-ante returns and rarely engages in jobs he feels are "beneath" him. Some may even develop formal codes about who they can steal from and when. And many of them secretly crave publicity, hoping their robberies are mentioned in the paper and the like. They don't necessarily limit their activity to theft (organized criminals, for example, engage in numerous other types of activity; see Chapter Three for more details), though they have few problems engaging in theft again and again if it suits them. For some profit-driven thieves, the lifestyle gets in their blood, and they can't imagine doing anything else. Others find the process odious (or at least unduly risky), and work solely for the rewards they will make. Regardless of how they view theft as a career, however, every professional thief dreams of that one perfect score that will allow him to retire from the life for good... or at least remove financial worries once and for all from the picture.



Subsequently, many successful thieves develop considerable legitimate assets, which they can use to mask their illegal activities. They will purchase businesses, trade stocks, and establish an economic foundation through their (usually well-laundered) earnings. As a result, they can appear as perfectly upstanding members of society, even paying taxes on their businesses the way normal citizens do. Spouses or family members often have no idea that their loved one is participating in anything illegal, and as long as the thief limits his activities to a few high-yield scores, the chances of getting caught are minimal. He can set up whatever façade suits him best, and the profits he makes from his scores can be explained away as a particularly good month at work.

Of course, even an ideal scenario has risks. Many thieves talk about the big score which will allow them to retire, only to find themselves unable to stay away from future scores once they do. Boredom and greed will entice them back into the life again... and even if they don't, someone out there may push them to it. Good thieves have a reputation like any other profession, and fellow members of the underworld may "persuade" reluctant retirees to revert to their former ways. This can be particularly trying if the thief has a legitimate front to keep up; every time he takes a job, he's putting his "straight" life at risk. Such are the hazards of the professional's life... and even those who approach their jobs carefully find themselves unable to break away when the time comes. The nature of illegal work almost guarantees it.

## THIEF TYPES

Thieves are as unique as any other demographic, and while they all operate under the basic parameters outlined in "Motivations" above, the specifics can take on dozens of different forms. Below is a sampling of different character types who may work as thieves within the *Edge of Midnight* universe. They can be used to generate more detailed personalities for a thief character, or inserted as a quick NPC if needed for a campaign.

### The Working Joe

The working joe is a blue-collar criminal, viewing his activities the same way he would a job at a factory or shipyard. He's not the brightest thief, nor the most ruthless, but he has a dogged work ethic that allows him to plan things out in thorough detail. Perhaps he turned to theft in the wake of unemployment, or he's doing it on the side to help make ends meet. Whatever the case, he doesn't view crime as glamorous or romantic. It's just another job — perhaps paying a little better, but ultimately no different than that company-issued paycheck he once took home at the end of the week.

The working joe likely picked up his trade through some legitimate source: a knowledge of power tools for example, could be used to help crack a safe, or an alarms expert may have learned what he knows through his work as an electrician. He may still perform such duties in a straight business, then apply them illegally when fellow thieves come calling. He rarely lets personal feelings interfere with his duties. He's methodical and professional at all times, taking care to do his job

## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS

properly the first time and leaving little chance for mistakes. His plans for the money are rarely grandiose. He doesn't want to retire to a private island or run for public office. More likely, he just wants a nice little house where his family can grow up in safety. Maybe it's a farm in the country where he can fish and raise horses. Maybe it's even more modest than that: a decent car or something nice he can give his wife. He rarely gets tangled in up in organized crime and he never takes foolish risks. He has responsibilities, after all; he's just using what skills he has to uphold them.

### The Inside Man

The inside man has been so close to riches for so long, he can taste them. His job gives him access to money, gold, jewelry... regardless of what it is, it's enough to fill his head with dreams of wealth. He's seen the way it's protected and knows how to get around all the locks and safeguards. It would be so easy just to reach out and take it... to nail his bosses for all the thankless years he's spent behind a desk.

Most inside men rarely stick to thieving for long. Their target is the big score — the one pay-off that sits at the tips of their fingers. Correspondingly, they devote numerous hours to the planning and execution of their big opportunity. Sometimes, they may require help from other thieves. In such cases they'll likely leave the actual heist to the pros, providing only the key details and the best method to go about it. They can then remain at their posts and not draw attention to themselves; when the heist is over, they can simply claim their share of the loot and revel in their scheme's fruition. Whether they stick to their position or leave and/or retire on their earnings depends on how successful the theft was... and whether the police can trace it back to them.

Inside men view theft as a work of art; the score has been planned and polished over the course of years, with every detail plotted out in advance. Though inwardly disgruntled, they have grown accustomed to projecting calm facades, and many can deceive others with the effortless ease of the best con men. They're also very patient, bearing burdens and perceived insults with infinite patience before finally exacting what they feel is just revenge. Oddly enough, those qualities often fall by the wayside when it comes to the grand theft. Inside men become excited and nervous when discussing their scheme. They take great pride in the elegance of their plans, and sometimes feel slighted if they don't receive proper credit. Similarly, they dislike any efforts to change the plan, and so certain are they of its success that they can't always react well when things go wrong.

A few thieves make careers out of being inside men — they take jobs at high profile businesses and scout them out for future thefts. Such inside men are essentially spies, quietly gather-





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

ing vital information before smuggling it out and selling it to someone willing to make good on it. They often plan capers themselves as other inside men do, but are much more likely to participate in the theft beyond just supplying information. When the heat has cooled down, they quit their job and begin seeking a new position, often changing names and identities to disguise their background. They must often shift their *modus operandi* for each theft (lest the police begin looking for common threads), but this becomes part of the challenge. Finding a new and different way of committing robbery gives them the same surge of pride that “one time” inside men gain from their solitary scores.

## The Dashing Romantic

Theft is a grand game to the dashing romantic. He steals only the best, and then only with a flourish or a *nom de plume*. Simple bank jobs are too low-brow for him; his targets are high-priced and exotic. Jewels or precious works of art dominate the target list: the more prominent, the better. He takes delight in confounding the latest security systems, overcoming the most vigilant guards, and leaving no clue as to his identity behind. He uses his ill-got gains to live the high life: buying fabulous estates, throwing luxurious parties, and dancing the night away at the hottest nightspots he can find. Such frills provide him with both cover and an opportunity to observe potential targets. Museum galas and debutante balls tend to feature the most fascinating valuables...

Police sentenced to catch dashing romantics consider these cases colossal pains in the ass. The media swarms all over them, turning an otherwise reasonable crime scene into a camera-packed zoo. Furthermore, the thief's poetic license leads him to quietly mock his pursuers, turning the cops into straight men for his theatrics. The trouble is, those who thrive at it are very good at what they do. For all their dime novel trappings, they remain devoted professionals at heart, and never let frivolity interfere with the job. They keep their equipment in top form, and constantly study new locks, traps, and security measures. They have secure fences set up to dispose of their goods (often selling them back to their original owners) and never reveal their secret lives to anyone if they can help it. Their secrecy sometimes causes problems, since they must find ways to disguise their income and hold certain aspects

of themselves in absolute quarantine. Dashing romantics also rarely associate with more “common” elements of the underworld, which means they struggle to find help that hasn't been selected far in advance. Finally, their glory hounding status assures them a certain infamy if they ever get caught, and the unmasking invariably goes hard for them. Victims lose the romance of being robbed by such a dashing figure once they learn that a friend or associate has betrayed them, and prison life can get nasty when the local animals decide to add a famous thief to their trophy wall...

## The Danger Junkie

Of all the templates discussed here, the danger junkie is most likely to be a compulsive thief. He thrills to the adrenaline rush of a well-executed score, living for the heightened pulse that comes whenever he snatches the goods. On the lower end of the scale, he'll charge into a bank, gun in hand, to demand the cash while threatening to blow everyone's head off. Higher level danger junkies put more thought into their heists, but still exhibit a high degree of daring and take risks that more cautious thieves avoid. Danger junkies rarely stop stealing, even when they've accumulated more money than they can ever possibly spend. They're addicted to the sensations, returning to crime again and again to get the same elusive rush.

Certainly, their reckless behavior causes no end of problems. Danger junkies get caught with unsurprising ease and even lengthy stints in prison can't blunt their chronic need to feel the rush. They often garner reputations as cowboys, making other criminals reluctant to work with them; those who get carried away with the thrill of it all may blow their cool at the pivotal moment, risking arrest or worse if they can't keep themselves under control. Despite that, however, their *modus operandi* has commendable elements. Their sense of daring leads them to take heists that other thieves won't touch and succeed where more cautious criminals would just walk away. The best of them have a strong ability to gauge danger, and know their capabilities far better than other thieves do. They can find ways around obstacles that no one else would think of, and know how to use their adrenaline bursts as a tool rather than a hindrance. Finally, they can think on the fly very well, and when things go wrong, they are very adept at finding quick solutions to their problems.

Danger junkies often work alone, but those with a cap on their passions can function quite well within a group. Such thieves often have proxies or partners who vouch for their skills, or else work with those accustomed to their intense enthusiasm. They may resort to other forms of crime to fulfill their urges, but few endeavors hold the adrenaline potential of an armed robbery or daring burglary. Danger junkies rarely bother to create false identities; while they may make a pretext of legitimacy to keep the law from becoming suspicious, they hold little interest in legal finances and often spend their money far too quickly for comfort. It doesn't matter to them. Even if they lose everything, they need only wait for the next robbery to be in the money again. The score is what they really live for.



## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS

### The Avenger

Like the inside man, the avenger is rarely a career thief, concentrating instead on a single target or heist. But while the inside man looks mainly at the reward, the avenger pays close attention to the *victim* of the theft. He's robbing his target because he feels wronged by them, or because he feels that they're doing evil somehow. The theft is engineered as payback: a means of balancing the scales and hitting the victim where it hurts.

Because the aim is revenge, the object being stolen isn't necessarily valuable (though cleaning out a man's bank account will certainly cause him a lot of grief). A beloved childhood object, for example, while not worth anything on the market, can have priceless emotional value. This some-

times makes the avenger's job easier, since his target won't be as well guarded as something with more intrinsic worth. The trick is learning *what* that object is, and how to steal it in such a way that the owner feels the pain. The method of stealing often plays a key role as well; the avenger might take steps to taunt or humiliate his enemy, or make a public spectacle of the crime to heap further indignities upon him. Avengers rarely think in terms of risk vs. reward; they gauge the dangers only against the emotional satisfaction granted by success.

Though the avenger is rarely a full-time thief, he may possess skills which are conducive to burglary or robbery. Like the inside man, he moves with great care, planning his revenge like a watchmaker laying out gears. If he recruits others to help him, they will likely need to be compensated — a tricky proposition if the target object cannot be sold. Perhaps most importantly, the avenger must take considerable steps to mask his plans, for if his feelings towards the victim are well known, they instantly direct suspicion in his direction. Most avengers work hard to create plausible alibis, to misdirect police scrutiny, or to find a scapegoat to take the blame. The very best can take full credit for their deeds, having engineered the theft such that the victim can do nothing in retaliation. Such instances are very rare, however; more likely, the thief must be content with private satisfaction, or else face recrimination, arrest, and possibly a bloody reprisal.

Once an avenger has achieved his goal, he usually lays off theft, having no further reason to pursue it. In some cases, he may target multiple victims, each of whom wronged the thief in some way and each of whom has some different vulnerability. That would lead to a number of thefts, which could stretch on for some time (perhaps even an entire campaign). But even then, the motive remains unchanged, and the avenger will most likely halt any thefts once he's gained the justice he craves.

### The Hardened Professional

The archetypical underworld figure is this career thief who knows his business and conducts it with skill and polish. He doesn't have time for frivolities and he never engages in any activity that might detract from his calling. He steals full time, viewing it as a long-term career and bringing his experience and handiwork to each new theft. Hardened professionals don't work with amateurs; they don't wish to take risks on unknowable propositions. They've often known their partners for years; strangers constitute a danger for them, one which they're far too experienced to risk without serious consideration.

The hardened professional has learned to detach emotion from his work. He operates with clockwork precision, acting with neither undue passion nor debilitating nerves. By separating himself from the dangers (and possible ethical implications) of his robberies, he can do his job quickly and efficiently. When he's not working he can be pleasant and affable, but everything about his profession is cool and emotionless. When things go wrong, he might use extreme measures to clear himself, such as taking hostages or abandoning a fellow team member to the police. The same detachment which he applies to his work allows him to make brutal decisions without thinking twice.

### **WARLOCK THIEVES**

With their powers and abilities so deeply tied in to the physical universe, warlocks make excellent thieves. Density magic allows them to break through even the toughest barriers, while electrical magic can short out alarms and gravity magic can be used to haul the loot away. Many warlocks turn to thievery to support their magical studies, and an exiled professor down on his luck can quickly turn things around with a quick score or two. Because of their ease in conducting heists, they are highly sought after by knowing members of the underworld, who will promise them all manner of reward in exchange for help on a tough score.

Anti-magic theft deterrents are hard to find in the U.C., since so many of them depend on malleable forces such as density and electricity. Security firms are working on new means of thwarting warlocks — for example, electrical alarms which trigger when they detect a surge or drop in the power lines, or double walls packed with sand, which will flood out when they are breached. Some banks have taken to fighting fire with fire, surreptitiously hiring warlocks to protect their vaults from any magical interlopers. Such arrangements are always kept off the books, lest they embarrass the owners.

Warlock thieves, like any other magic-user, always leave traces of their activities behind. Unlike other burglars, who can hide their presence with masks and gloves, the "fingerprints" of magic use can never be hidden, and crystal ball squads are called in immediately upon detecting a magic-based crime. It allows them to more easily trace how a burglary was committed, and to narrow the list of suspects down to a feasible number. Consequently, warlock thieves will try to hide their magic use as much as possible, and often demure on smaller pay-offs because of the risks involved. Even so, theft is one of the few reliable ways a known warlock can make a living, and with the anti-magic movement on the rise, law enforcement expects to see the number of magic-based thefts increase precipitously in the coming years.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Similarly, the hardened professional is very careful about how he spends his money. There's little flashiness to his habits. He doesn't gamble away huge sums or make a lot of frivolous purchases like clothes or cars. His money is carefully tucked away, laundered to prevent suspicion or quietly invested in long-term accounts. He treats his gains like a lifeline to normality, preparing for the day when he can retire from crime and enjoy the fruits of his labors. His caution gives him an uncanny amount of freedom in the jobs he takes; he doesn't need to chance a risky score just to pay off his gambling debts or keep his wife in the style to which she has become accustomed. The ability to walk away from danger is often the only thing keeping a thief — even a good one — out of prison.

And yet, many hardened professionals have done prison time; it's hard to avoid getting pinched when they're younger and haven't gleaned all the tricks of the trade. But they learn quite well from such mishaps and rarely repeat the same mistakes. Those who haven't served prison sentences don't appreciate the dangers as much, and therefore tend to act with less caution. The hardened professional knows that all the planning in the world can't stop some things from going wrong, and that jail time is always a risk. The key is minimizing that risk, rather than pretending it doesn't exist. Often, the only way to learn that is to be captured and punished. The hardened professional understands every aspect of his job: a careful calculation of chances taken, rewards reaped, and the best ways to emerge from it all intact.

## THEFT-BASED SCENARIOS AND CAMPAIGNS

A burglary or armed robbery makes a natural fulcrum for an *Edge of Midnight* scenario. It has a stated goal, a series of obstacles to overcome, and potential ramifications which can be spun out into future adventures. An entire campaign set around a band of thieves is remarkably easy to set up. There are always more things to be stolen — each in a new and different way — and the police make fine foils against which the party may pit themselves.

Scenarios based around a big heist follow the parameters outlined in "Thievery 101" on page 36. The characters find a suitable target (usually provided by the GM), learn everything they can about the protective measures around it, formulate a plan, enact the theft itself, and finally deal with any fallout or consequences. Within this framework, there are several important elements which the GM can use to make the theft (or thefts) more exciting and memorable. A brief discussion of each follows.

### 1) A Good Target

Targets translate to both the objects being stolen and the persons or institutions from which they are taken. Both can be used to make a memorable heist scenario, adding considerable complexities to even the simplest of thefts.

## THE LAST BIG SCORE

One of the crime genre's most beloved stereotypes — the last big score — can be used as an excellent climax to a robbery-based campaign. After years of careful planning and daring heists, the PCs finally have enough of a nest egg to retire in style. All they need to do is pull off one final job. As the culmination of a lengthy campaign, the last big score should be among the most memorable scenarios the players have encountered. It should be larger, riskier, more intricate, or some combination of the three. It should challenge the characters' skills and the players' planning abilities, promising to solve all their problems if they pull it off — or a lifetime in prison if they don't.

But more important than the heist itself is the characters' motives for entering into it. It should reflect the circumstances of the campaign, and invest their activities with more than just a big chunk of cash at the end of it. Perhaps they see the pay-off as their last, best chance to escape the criminal life, or it represents the realization of a long-cherished dream. Many stories based around a last big score posit the heroes as unwilling participants. They've retired, or gone legit, or never had any reason to rob in the first place. But circumstances force them back into the game, compelling them to conduct the biggest heist of their lives or risking losing whatever they've fought so hard to obtain. Criminals in *The Edge of Midnight* can be very persuasive when it comes to reluctant accomplices, especially those who committed other crimes in the past. Not only does it provide the final heist with a proper sense of tension, it adds an additional wrinkle as the PCs seek to extradite themselves from further coercion. Will they finally clear themselves of such entanglements, or will the robbery leave the door open for similar risks in the future?

Coercion from outside forces can also lead to a particularly satisfying final heist — the robbery as revenge. If the characters have operated under the heel of an underworld kingpin — forced to pay protection money, or even perform heists at his behest — it may be an irresistible plum to rob him blind before the curtain falls. Not only does it free them from his control, if the pay-off is big enough, it will hamper his ability to track them down... as well as causing him considerable embarrassment. Alternately, perhaps their antagonist is less connected to them, but has still succeeded in stymieing and tormenting them on numerous occasions. A robbery could be the ideal way to balance the scales, especially if the figure cannot be confronted directly. A particularly fiendish twist entails the PCs framing their nemesis for the crime, ensuring that he endures a long stint in prison while they enjoy their retirement on his behalf.

Motives such as these can help lend an appropriately dramatic closure to the campaign, providing the characters with both a strong reason to embark upon their last scenario, and a suitably important stage for them to take a final bow.

## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS

The objects being stolen are what Alfred Hitchcock called “McGuffins.” That is, their exact nature really doesn’t matter. Their importance lies in the fact that the characters want them, which allows the story to take place. Within that framework, the target can fit almost any parameters. It need only have intrinsic value (to someone somewhere) and be readily portable.

That doesn’t mean, however, that it should be just anything. Money and diamonds are good staples for a theft, but they grow tedious after awhile and the players will be less willing to risk their characters over it. The target should seize their imaginations; it should thrill them or challenge them in

some way. It needn’t necessarily be exotic, but it should always feel unique, and give its theft a sense of originality to it. Sometimes, this can be accomplished by placing it in unique surroundings (for example, if the players have never robbed a museum before, it can be placed there). Or it can appear as worthless to everybody except a single collector... who will pay anything to own it. If it has a strong narrative hook, then the players will be eager to make a play for it, instead of just shrugging and going along for appearance’s sake.

Alternately, the target *can* simply be money or the like... but the characters should require it for some reason other than simple profit. Money can be oddly limiting from a role-playing

perspective. It serves little purpose in game play besides purchasing equipment and once the players have a certain amount, the idea of more of it won’t sufficiently motivate them. That is, unless they have some overriding need to get a great deal of money in a hurry. Then it serves as the fulcrum for something else — which need not be something the players necessarily want. They could suddenly find themselves in debt to mobsters or other unsavory types who wanted it all last Tuesday. Or those close to them could be in trouble — a brother looking at a long prison sentence, for example, and requiring a high-priced lawyer to get him out. (Some players will create characters with no obvious ties, since it saves them from such soul searching, but even the most hard-bitten loner may have a friend or two.) In this case, the McGuffin isn’t the money itself, but whatever problem the money can solve — the gambling debt, the bribed judge, the operation on the sick nephew, etc. The theft then becomes a means to an end: memorable for what it can do besides pad the characters’ bank account.

Alternately, the target might not be something they themselves want at all, but rather something someone else wants — someone who stands to help the PCs in some way. He may be a collector of rare objects who can implicate the characters’ enemies in a crime, or a warlock searching for a particular book whose abilities





## GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

can help the characters with an unrelated problem. Such individuals may not be willing to help the party without some form of leverage. That one-of-a-kind postage stamp or the money to pull up stakes and start anew can be a powerful convincer. In these cases, the theft is still a means to an end, and its ultimate purpose may have nothing to do with profit at all. The GM can spin out a chain of convincers, tasking the party to go through a series of burglaries, robberies, and other obstacles just to assemble all of the required elements for their ultimate target.

Just as other people's interests can lend color and depth to the objects being stolen, so too can the objects' owners add flavor to an otherwise ordinary caper. In this case, the PCs'

motivations stem not from what they are stealing, but how it will impact the owner. It could be revenge for a past slight, or a need to "save" the object from someone who hasn't the first idea how to care for it. ("He's using *what* for a spittoon?!") The target could be an organized crime syndicate, hoarding money which the PCs feel could be better spent elsewhere; or a corrupt politician, using illicit funds to destroy his opponents. The nature of the victim could influence how the theft is conducted as well (the PCs may conduct a flamboyant or public robbery in an effort to further embarrass him, for example). Whatever the reason, their motives turn the theft into a more rarefied form of conflict whose implications may last far beyond the initial scenario. Victims of a robbery may go to

### MANAGING THE MONEY

A character's finances can become tricky when he's a professional thief. If he acquires too much money too quickly, he'll grow complacent... and more importantly, the game may lose some of its gritty edge. A down-on-his-luck character doesn't feel quite so destitute when he has a mattress full of stolen bills, and even a career thief will be hard-pressed to justify another bank robbery if he has more money than he can possibly spend. While wealth may fit certain character types (crime lords, for example), the GM should take steps to limit the size of the piggy bank if he feels it may upset the campaign.

Thankfully, in *The Edge of Midnight* universe, there's plenty of ways to fleece the characters of their money... especially if it's stolen. If the characters have previously-established spending habits — a penchant for gambling, say, or a fondness for expensive night-clubbing — then their bank account can easily dwindle almost without their being aware of it. Canier players, however, may resist such temptations, instead storing away what they earn for some future use. Even then, however, the GM can impose certain penalties. The most obvious entails fencing — often the only means of exchanging stolen goods. Fences buy property at a fraction of their actual worth, supposedly to offset the risks they take for handling hot items. Because they're often the only way to get rid of a score, the players may have to accept their price-gouging as a matter of course... which means that the fabulous wealth they hoped to achieve will suddenly be exponentially less than they thought.

The local crime syndicate is another good way to pry money from the players' tight grasp. Operation within syndicate territory always has a price tag, and the mob keeps a close eye on any prominent criminal enterprise in their city. The characters may have to surrender a cut of their profits as protection money or else find themselves on the wrong side of a cement overcoat. Alternately, the mob may induce the characters into launching another score just for them — in which they, not the party, get to keep all the proceeds. Either way, such sticky fingers have a way of draining the characters' coffers quickly. Laundering, too, requires mob influence, and if the characters wish to avoid the attention of the revenuers, they will need to pay a "processing fee" to wash their money clean.

Then there's operating costs. A good theft requires planning time and sometimes specialized equipment as well. Blueprints to the target building may need to be purchased from unscrupulous drafters, while access to the power grid (to shut off alarms and the like) may require bribery or police protection. And anything used in a robbery becomes potential evidence unless it is disposed of (a getaway car, for example, may need to be destroyed in order to deny the police any clues). All of which requires an initial investment which the characters will need to either pony up or convince someone to loan them. They may be able to find a stakehorse with sufficient funds to establish their operation, but like fences and mobsters, such involvement means surrendering a piece of the pie.

Finally, even if the theft is a smashing success, the characters may have to wait quite awhile before realizing their newfound wealth. Art and other valuables can't be fenced until the heat dies down, and even cash must be carefully husbanded lest it draw undue attention. A thief who pulls down a huge score may be forced to bury his loot underneath the floorboards for months — sometimes years — and then only spend it in tiny dollops. Money laundering is often very slow, and while it protects the score well enough once it emerges from the process, building up layer after layer of innocuous connections takes time. Thieves hoping to live the high life right after their score are those most easily captured, since their sudden good fortune waves a bright red flag that even the dimmest investigator can spot.

None of these costs should mean derailing the theft, or making the pay-off too small to justify the risk. But neither should the operating costs be overlooked, lest they rob the GM of a strong tool for maintaining game balance. Money can easily be replaced without losing the flavor of the campaign, and in such a manner as to keep the players hungry and eager rather than feeling cheated. Fortune turns quickly in *The Edge of Midnight*, and the careful application of a few "unforeseen costs" can keep ostensibly downtrodden PCs from suddenly joining the ranks of millionaires.

## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS

great lengths to reclaim their valuables, or find the thieves and enact some measure of revenge. What started out as a relatively straightforward scenario could become a recurring part of the campaign, as the PCs and their former target spar again and again in an effort to come out on top.

### 2) An Interesting Plan

Planning a theft can be the most rewarding part of a scenario because it lets the players take a direct hand in how it unfolds. Their characters slowly uncover the various pieces to the puzzle, then decide how best to assemble them. They usually have the freedom to plan the robbery however they wish — to come up with solutions to the various obstacles, tailor the approach to match their skills, and plan a proper exit strategy once the goods are in hand. In these cases, the GM would do well to give them as much leeway as possible. Present the set-up, let them uncover the various issues, and then leave them alone to solve the puzzle as best they can. The plan, when it arrives, will feel more like an accomplishment if the players come up with it themselves.

This doesn't mean that the GM can't provide them with pre-planned support. Before the players can get around the obstacles, they need to know what they are — which means a lot of scouting, spying, and general skullduggery. Maps of the building may be needed, as well as electrical blueprints and the like. The GM can easily provide an NPC willing to sell such materials to them, or prepare a short scene allowing them to procure what they need. Similarly, guard shifts, special equipment, and the make and model of a safe or vault, can be readied beforehand and presented when the players ask for them. The GM should exhibit some flexibility when delivering the information, tailoring it to players' specifics without losing sight of its core.

Above all, originality should be encouraged in developing the plan. The less routine the players' solutions to the problem, the more interesting and exciting the actual theft will be. If someone comes up with an approach that you haven't considered, be prepared to run with it and shift the scenario appropriately. Planning should constitute the bulk of a good theft; make sure it doesn't stumble along the way. Each little element — each barrier the PCs must overcome or new detail they learn about their target — bears the potential for good role-playing. Take advantage of the opportunity to play out such discoveries; don't just hand it to them with a skill roll and a wave. The more the players can exercise their brains and/or portray their characters' personalities, the better the scenario will be.

### 3) A Twist

No matter how well-laid the plan, something unexpected always comes along. Whether it's a last-minute change in the guard, a transfer to a more secure facility, or just a yappy little dog that won't keep quiet, there's always a loose thread ready to foul up the whole works. If a heist goes exactly according to plan, it robs the scenario of its most exciting elements, turning what could be a thrilling climax into a ho-hum exercise of going through the motions.

Twists can be easily facilitated if a character fails a die roll at a particular period. They can also be scripted beforehand, and sprung on the players when they least suspect it. The aim is to increase the tension surrounding the theft: to ratchet up the suspense and make the players sweat a little. Such twists are very common in heist stories, and shouldn't come as a huge surprise to players who know the genre. That doesn't mean that their carefully-wrought plans should be destroyed (although the possibility should certainly exist). Rather, an unforeseen development serves as a sort of litmus test for a plan — placing stress on it to see if it can survive. Canny players should be able to react to all but the most catastrophic occurrences, either altering their plan to fit the new condition or keeping the old one intact despite any new pressures. But without a few tests of some sort — something with real and serious consequences — the exciting climax to a robbery will be anything but.

### 4) Fallout

Finally, the end of a heist — whether successful or not — should not necessarily be the end of the scenario. While it makes for an ideal climax, the denouement which follows it can be just as rewarding from a role-playing standpoint. The characters may become the subject of suspicion, forcing them to dodge investigators, hide the loot, and secure their alibi. Fences could prove to be unreliable, leaving them stuck with far less money than they thought. Other underworld figures might try to rip them off, having heard about the "big score" and hoping to rob the characters of their hard-won reward. Or they might simply need to sit on the take until it's safe to sell it off, prompting the need to find a proper hiding place. Any of these could serve to enhance even the most fulfilling heist.

In the most important sense, the fallout of a robbery serves to connect it with a larger campaign. Consequences play a large part in *The Edge of Midnight* setting, and they often come into play here, when the dust has settled and the thieves' only desire is to pull themselves free. New foes can be introduced, such as police inspectors or rival criminals looking to cut in on the PCs' action. The problems they cause could lay seeds for future scenarios, or even set up another heist if things get really hairy. Similarly, the disposition of the stolen loot could set new conflicts into motion, or at least give the party something new to worry about. ("Is our fence ripping us off?" "Has someone found the strongbox in the basement?")

In order to bring such elements out, the GM should devote some thought to events after the heist. Don't just leave it as an afterthought along with handing out experience points. Ask the players where they go after the theft, what kind of routine they set, and how they dispose of (or spend) their ill-got gains. Run a scene or two recounting the police investigation and whether or not the characters are suspects. Let them deal with their fence when securing the goods, establishing him as a real figure in the campaign instead of just a pay-off mechanic. And, of course, such developments can always be brought back later to complicate the characters' lives... or perhaps provide them with new opportunities. As the final phase of any heist, the fallout or denouement can provide the GM with the strongest links to future plotlines, and help ensure that the scenario is a memorable one.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## THIEVES IN MIXED PARTIES

Burglars and armed robbers work far more readily with characters from different backgrounds than do mobsters or con artists. For one thing, their careers aren't so deeply immersed in an alternative culture. They don't have the demands of the grift or the code of some Mafia don to adhere to. They can rub shoulders with ordinary citizens, talk about the same things, go to the same picture shows, etc., without diminishing the core aspects of their character. Robbery is also a highly romanticized crime, which makes it more palatable to laymen (assuming they aren't the ones being robbed, of course). It's easier to sit down and play cards with a professional thief than it is with a mob hit man or an acknowledged swindler. Because they're often more selective about their targets, they tend to feel more trustworthy than other criminals, and less likely to turn on their friends. Most importantly, thieves can go through stretches without pulling any heists and yet still maintain the basis of their character.

The primary challenge with using thieves in mixed parties is making sure the scenarios complement everyone. In a non-robbery scenario, this is relatively easy. A thief's skills can come in very handy, whether it be picking a lock or brandishing a firearm. His sharp eyes can spot potential trouble coming, and his knowledge of alarms and protective measures allows him to get into and out of places with ease. (And of course, long-time role-players are quite familiar with the thief as an archetype; any old-school *Dungeons & Dragons* player has had one in his party at some time or another.)

The trouble comes when non-thief characters are asked to participate in a theft. Not only will it likely go against their characters' core concept, but their skills and abilities might not be of much use. Again, GMs can counter this by making sure that the robbery can involve everyone. In the first place, it should be something all of them are willing to do. A non-thief character may be forced into

it (through blackmail or some other coercion), but the *player* must not feel like he's being forced into something that goes against his character. Secondly, the target and/or the plan should let everyone play a part. This may require some tailoring for characters unused to such demands. For instance, if someone's character is a good speaker, he may be called upon to distract a key law enforcement official. If he's a P.I., he can track down important information like forgotten entrances or disgruntled employees. Policemen are most difficult to incorporate because they are entirely on the opposite side of the



## CHAPTER TWO: THIEVES AND ROBBERS

“cops and robbers” equation. Their participation should be carefully set up within the campaign, and presented in some way that fits the character’s story (the robbery is a bizarre form of justice, for example, or the cop is only doing it because he’s desperate for the money). Mixed parties do best with one-shot thefts — heists that are not likely to be duplicated, and which don’t expand into multiple burglaries or robberies. The GM should ensure that such scenarios are balanced with the other characters’ needs, and that any troubles are of the “exciting in-game ramifications” variety rather than the “unhappy player stuck doing something he hates” variety.

### THIEF NPCs

#### MILLICENT ARROYO, BOXWOMAN

The woman behind the counter at Music Box Jewelers in New Eden doesn’t look like a thief. Her high-boned features are more reminiscent of an aging housewife, her beauty stubbornly clinging to her as she marches resolutely into her late forties. Her bright red hair comes out of a bottle, and her edgy laugh suggests unspoken nerves hidden just beneath the features. She wears nice but understated clothes, and her tall frame is kept in moderately good shape by a strict exercise regime. Her most striking features are her hands; long willowy fingers move with unearthly grace, lovely despite the nails cut far too short to be fashionable. They draw attention to her wares quite readily, making customers forget her rather brittle speaking tone. She’s good (though not great) at her job — as the Music Box’s owner, she’s earned a modest reputation as a jewelry dealer — and the store manages to squeak by as a more or less break-even proposition.

No one would guess that Millicent is one of the premiere safecrackers in the city, a thief so skilled that criminals contact her from as far off as Gateway with offers for work. She always had a knack for opening locks, starting with her big sister’s diary and moving on to the various bolts and barriers in her family home. No one could keep anything from her, a fact which brought her parents no end of heartbreak. When they punished her for her activates, she learned to stop taking things; she’d unlock the door, have a good look at whatever was behind it, and leave no evidence of her passing behind.

Those skills served her well when she moved on to professional thievery. She was pulling safe jobs by the time she turned twenty-one, assisting in burglaries, working jewelry heists, and (on one memorable occasion) tunneling into a diamond exchange to loot the goods in the safe. Her sensitive hands seemed to sense the weak spots in any lock. She knew every make and model, and could usually break them inside of five minutes. By the time she reached her thirties, she had worked with dozens of crews on scores of jobs. Every one of them was a masterpiece of the safecracker’s art.

Her *modus operandi* has prevented her from fully capitalizing on her skills, however. Like every good thief, she’s exceedingly cautious, which means giving up ripe scores when they smell too dangerous to her. She never performs scouting missions and she never gives her real name to the crews she works with. They contact her through a middleman — her accountant and business manager, who helps fence her cut as well as laundering the funds she receives. She usually wears a wig while working, and never speaks more than she can help it. Her caution has served her well on several occasions when her crews were pinched, but couldn’t give the police any details about their accomplice. She’s never been arrested and indeed has only seen the inside of a jail cell once, when her mother took her to pick up her father from the drunk tank.

In exchange for such caution, her cut is usually a little smaller than expected. And she pays a hefty chunk to both her manager and the local gaunt gang, who ask for protection to let her run her store unmolested. But through careful management and a comparatively modest lifestyle, she’s set aside a nice little nest egg for when she finally decides to retire. She’s cool and collected when performing her job, reacting well to unforeseen circumstances. Her colleagues are invariably impressed by her professionalism, though they sometimes chafe at the severe constraints she puts on her activities. She dislikes armed robberies and refuses to carry a gun; locks and safes are the only part of a job that she will consent to do.

Away from her calling, she’s a bit of a wreck. Millicent never married and her string of relationships has been severely hampered by her tendency to keep people at arm’s length. Her only real friends are a group of fellow jewelers, with whom she plays gin rummy once a week. She can appear curt and obtuse when dealing with people for the first time, and she rarely knows what to do or say during social occasions. Her three employees consider her an old maid and quietly mock her from behind her back. Millicent is aware that her personal life could be better, but doesn’t know how to improve things without risking exposure. She claims her money comes from a nonexistent great aunt, which assuages most suspicions. But the closer people get, the more nervous she becomes, and she ends up thrusting them away rather than endangering them or herself with knowledge of her penchant for thievery. She tells herself that it’s the only life for her, and the steadily accruing pile of cash in her bank account goes a long way towards assuaging her lonely heart.

#### Millicent Arroyo

**Attributes:** Brains 5, Brawn 4, Build 5, Gut 6, Moxie 5, Smoothness 8.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 25.

**Skills:** Appraise 8, Athletics 4, Contortions 6, Demolitions 4, Disguise 3, Etiquette 3, Evasion 5, Fast Talk 4, Firearms 3, Perception 5, Pick Lock 9, Sleight of Hand 8, Stealth 6, Streetwise 4.

**Backgrounds:** Alert, Small, Wise.

**Profession:** Thief 3.



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## KELVIN KURTZMAN, FENCE

Kelvin Kurtzman will buy anything if people are willing to sell. From priceless diamonds to used tin cans, it's all passed through his store at one time or another. His reputation as a grade-A fence has put him in tight with Gateway's underworld, who use him to move their swag without a hitch. His connections with eastern businessmen give him an exclusive line to buyers of illicit art or rare collectibles, while his link to the Patterson Brothers and other organized criminals ensures he has numerous ways of laundering any money brought to him. If a thief needs to turn his score into some easy cash, Kurtzman's Pawnshop is the place to go.

In addition, he has made a name for himself as a magpie and junk collector: hardly the trappings one expects from a man such as he. He collects old newspapers from the neighborhood where his large shop is located, as well as unused buttons, fake jewelry, and children's toys. His pawnshop is a treasure trove of lost and unusual items, most worthless but a few quite unique tucked away amid its dusty corners. He handles his fencing duties from an empty apartment near the waterfront, where he can conduct any exchanges without molestation. A quartet of gaunts serve as his bodyguards on such occasions.

Despite the considerable success of his business, he still had his troubles with the law. He's been arrested three times for possession of stolen goods, the last earning him a two-year stint in Great Quarry prison up north. The experience was not a pleasant one for him and he dreads going back; he has neither the physical strength nor the animal cunning to survive for long in prison. Now, he pays off the local police to let his business alone and in return has served as a quiet stool pigeon on the few occasions they have asked... though he never leaks names that might get him into trouble with Gateway's criminal kingpins. Plenty of common lowlifes frequent his establishment, and he's happy to throw a few of them to the cops every now and then, leaving the big fish be.

He lives in a finely-furnished apartment above his store, its wealth all the more dazzling for the shabby façade surrounding it. The store is cluttered and dusty, with little rhyme or reason placed on its contents. Kelvin spends much of his time on the phone, keeping tabs on the extensive network of contacts which he has spread out through the country. His chats keep him up to date on a great deal, lending him insight into the goings on of various underworld figures. He knows when the heat's been turned up in Central City or when a fugitive has fled the gang wars of Terminus. He knows when new drug shipments come in through the Sola Diablo, or if a new warlock is making trouble in Nova Roma. All of it comes to him through the telephone wires; he learns everything he needs to know while sitting behind the grungy cage in his shop.

Indeed, Kelvin's constant phone calls have led him to some very unusual suppositions. He feels that something is wrong with the world, and marvels at the fact that none of the things that pass through his store have a history dating back to before

the war. Even old paintings and historic coins feel wrong to him somehow — everything but those rare few objects which seem more tangible than the rest of the world. As a fence, he's been in contact with several other members of the Few, which has helped him piece together a few precious facts. He's begun hoarding those objects which possess, in his words, "the weight of the real," keeping them for himself rather than passing them on to potential buyers. He's even commissioned a few thefts of such objects, some so innocuous their owners would never dream of having to protect them. He stores them in the basement of his shop, a miniature museum of curios and knickknacks which he maintains with unusual care. They have helped him fill in a few blanks about the nature of the world — not many, but enough to know that the warlocks who brought the White Light are connected to it somehow. He will not willingly part with such information unless he trusts the questioner implicitly — something all too rare in his line of work. Fellow members of the Few, however, may find the going easier... at least, if they're willing to provide him with a new addition or two to his collection...

Kelvin wears false teeth from the time an angry customer smashed his mouth with a pistol butt, an act which led him to dip into his bank account and hire a hit man to make amends. Despite that act of vengeance, he is hardly an imposing specimen, with flabby jowls, untucked shirts and a kind of meandering amble to his walk that suggests he's about to topple over at any moment. His hair looks perennially wet, parted in a shabby widow's peak that does little justice to the face it frames. He speaks in halting, unsure tones, and his pudgy fingers are constantly clenching into fists. His eye for value remains strong, however, and despite all the junk he collects, he's never failed to collect his money's worth on stolen goods. He keeps most of his profits in a strongbox buried under his cellar, doled out whenever he needs to buy something. He doesn't trust banks and would never give any of his own funds out for laundering. So his cash supply grows and grows, waiting for some hypothetical "safe" moment when he can finally start spending it in earnest. A thief who could ascertain its location would become rich overnight; that is, if he didn't mind losing the services of the best fence in the Commonwealth.

### Kelvin Kurtzman

**Attributes:** Brains 6, Brawn 4, Build 4, Gut 7, Moxie 4, Smoothness 5.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 20.

**Skills:** Appraise 10, Brawl 2, Bureaucracy 5, Drive (Car, Truck) 5, Evasion 3, Fast Talk 5, Firearms 5, Forgery 2, Intimidation 4, Lore (Memorabilia) 10, Perception 6, Puzzles 7, Sleight of Hand 3, Streetwise 6.

**Backgrounds:** Alert, Lucky, Wise.

**Profession:** Con Artist 1, Investigator 2.

# CHAPTER THREE MORSTERS



™As far back as I can remember,  
I've always wanted to be a gangster.

- Henry Hill (Ray Liotta),  
Goodfellas

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## MOBSTERS

*Lionel came to with the blood rushing up to his head. He was hanging upside down by a hook at the end of the dock. The Gateway fog swirled around him as he struggled to raise his arms. They were bound at the wrists to a heavy weight, which swung slowly back and forth above the water. As he shook his head to clear it, the two figures standing nearby gradually came into focus. Frankie Two Toes wore a heavy jacket against the cold, his beady eyes glaring out from under the tight fedora on his head. His partner Geech Sinclair towered above him, gaunt teeth bared in a hideous sneer. A large knife was clenched in his hand, poised over the rope which held Lionel's chains.*

*"Fellas?" he ventured gamely. "What's... what's goin' on?"*

*"You missed your payment again," Frankie replied. "That's twenty large you owe the big man, without a dime in return. He likes you Lionel, but it's gotten out of hand."*

*"So?" Lionel asked hastily. "I'm good for it."*

*"Two months ago, you were good for it. But that was then." Geech twirled the knife and stepped forward as Frankie continued. "So now you take a powder so the rest of the boss's clients don't start gettin' ideas."*

*The gaunt began to saw into the rope as Lionel struggled helplessly in his bonds.*

*"You guys... you can't do this. I'm the biggest gambler in the city!"*

*"You WERE the biggest gambler. Now you're just an ugly spot on our books." The rope continued to fray as Lionel's thrashings grew more panicked.*

*"Hey. Hey look, I can get the money fellas! Wait! No, don't—"*

*"Sorry. The boss says you gotta go." The rope snapped and Lionel fell shrieking towards the cold harbor water. The last thing he heard was Frankie Two Toes calling down after him.*

*"No hard feelings, Lionel. It's just business."*

## WHAT IS ORGANIZED CRIME?

Organized crime (referred to here as "syndicates" or "organizations") differs from other forms of crime in both its structure and long-term stability. While crimes of passion are singular events and street gang activity is often ill-planned and poorly coordinated, organized crime is built to last. It follows the model of all legitimate businesses, namely developing its resources and diversifying its means of generating a profit. With the money it makes, it can buy political protection, granting it an authority that petty criminals cannot hope for and the flexibility to respond to new market demands. While individual faces may come and go, the system itself remains.

The exact nature of organized crime varies from syndicate to syndicate. Each group has its own way of doing things, and the powerful organizations of Terminus differ widely from the tongs and triads of Gateway. To qualify as a criminal organization, however (instead of just a street gang or short-term crew), a given group must exhibit the following traits:

### An Identifiable Hierarchy

All criminal organizations have a ranking system, used to maintain order and control the conduct of its members. This system must have three or more levels of leadership, and exercise nominal control over most of the activities conducted by its members.

### A Wide Variety of Criminal Activities

Organized crime isn't limited to a single field or illegal endeavor. It diversifies and exploits as many forms of vice as it can. A specific list of endeavors can be found starting on the next page, but it encompasses almost every illegal or unethical behavior conceivable.

### Use of Violence

Criminal organizations attempt to monopolize their activities, leading to violent clashes with rival groups. Violence is an acceptable "business practice" for criminal syndicates — the principle difference between them and more legitimate enterprises. A more detailed discussion can be found starting on page 71.

### Access to Large Amounts of Capital and the Ability to Reinvest It

Success in crime, like any other endeavor, creates new resources which can solve many problems. It also lets the syndicate invest in new endeavors and exploit different markets — just like a legitimate business.

### A Code of Ethics or Behavior

Criminal organizations emphasize the camaraderie or brotherhood of their members, which helps foster loyalty and ensure compliance within the ranks. Membership is sometimes a very complicated affair, and can entail rituals and uniform markings such as scars or tattoos. Similarly, most organized criminals have a set of rules by which its members are expected to abide. "Never rob a known policeman" and "don't harm women or kids" are good examples of such rules.

### Protection From Legitimate Authorities

With the funds earned from their illicit endeavors, criminal organizations are able to buy security from those who might otherwise oppose them, such as the police or elected politicians. Bribes, blackmail, and backroom agreements are the marks of such protection, allowing the legitimate authorities to maintain a façade of honesty while affording the syndicate the freedom to conduct its activities as it sees fit.

Within these parameters, a wide variety of criminal groups have developed, each conducting illegal business in an effort to maximize profits and attain status and respect in its given community. In a capitalist society like the Unified Commonwealth, they're as natural as scales on a fish.

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

### SYNDICATE STRUCTURES

Most syndicates in the U.C. follow the basic organizational model of the American Mafia and similar groups. Specific names and titles may change, depending upon the group's particular make-up, but the underlying system remains the same.

#### Don

At the top of the syndicate stands a single boss (or perhaps a small group of bosses). He directs the organization below him like a general in the field, allocating different tasks to different groups. His word is law in the organization, and those beneath him learn to do as he says without question. The Don often maintains ties with local politicians and other figures, ensuring that the protection afforded his organization translates down to those beneath him. He also serves to mediate disputes within his organization and to keep friction among his underlings from tearing the syndicate apart.

#### Consigliere

Or "Counselor," is a senior advisory position with little direct power, but a huge amount of influence. Consiglieres are usually retired members of the organization, although they can also include prominent lawyers and other "civilians." They counsel the Don on the best course of action, suggest changes in membership, and generally help guide the organization in a prosperous and profitable direction.

#### Underboss

The Don's most powerful minions receive their orders directly from the Don, implementing policy according to his dictates. They are usually in charge of a specific operation (i.e., bookmaking, drug dealing) or specific territories within the Don's sphere of influence. They have authority over a number of capos (typically two to five), and pass requests and problems directly up to the Don. In some cases, a single underboss is designated as a "second-in-command" for the organization, and will replace the Don should his superior be killed.

#### Capo

Capos are the street level authority, charged with fulfilling the orders given to them by the underbosses. They organize and control the most basic elements of the syndicate: individual drug deals, single gambling and prostitution operations, and the like. Most capos have an established base of operations (a local business such as a nightclub or a barbershop) and anywhere from three to thirty footmen at their beck and call.

#### Footman

Footmen are the lowest rank of the organization, those charged with the most basic tasks. They are the hands-on enforcers, the collection agents, and the muscle to make their Don's will known. When someone needs to be killed, the footmen are the ones who pull the trigger; when a theft or a drug sale is undertaken, the footmen do the deed. Their authority is severely limited — save the fear or intimidation they elicit

among their fellows — but they enjoy the protection of the mob as a whole. They are most likely to be arrested and imprisoned, but the benefits they enjoy (or the threat of fierce reprisals) usually keeps them quiet. Even if they choose to inform on their superiors, their knowledge of the mob's operations rarely extends any higher than the capo above them.

#### Associate

Beneath the footmen stand a wide array of criminal types whose activities are connected with the organization in some way. They include freelance criminals, street gangs paying protection, and prostitutes or card sharks working at mob-owned locations. On the extreme periphery, they also include legitimate employees such as bartenders, policemen on the take, storeowners paying protection money, and the like.

Movement between these ranks can be rapid or slow, depending on the organization and the competence of the individual in question. Few syndicates have any hard, fast rules for advancement, though success is generally rewarded and the blessing of the Don is usually required. The ruthless lifestyle fostered by most syndicates means that Machiavellian politics dominate all levels of the system, and while turning on one's fellows is uniformly forbidden, those who know how to disguise their actions can easily have a rival eliminated in order to take his place. Clashes between rival mobs and the high level of violence fostered by the criminal lifestyle mean that the attrition rate is fairly high regardless.

## MOB ACTIVITIES

Criminal organizations practice every conceivable kind of illegal operation, from numbers rackets to gun running and murder. Like any other enterprise, crime is constantly growing: responding to the demands of the market and the ever-shifting lines of legality and morality. Unlike street-level crime, mob activities involve a fair amount of forethought, and often require extensive planning. Their sole purpose is profit: for their Don and for the various underlings beneath him. Syndicates exist solely to make money. That is their primary purpose. They are criminals only because their pursuit of profit leaves no space for even the most basic moral and legal tenets.

Below is a detailed description of the most prevalent types of organized criminal activities and the way the syndicates carry them out. Each description includes a brief list of scenario hooks, illustrating how mobster characters can become involved in their organization's dirty business:





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## AUTOMOBILE THEFT

Cars are expensive items in high demand throughout the Unified Commonwealth. Keeping track of them is a difficult task (the U.C.'s Automotive Bureau struggles to properly license them all). Switching plates easily masks stolen cars, and the theft of new cars can turn a profit relatively quickly, especially if the buyer has no compunctions about where it comes from. Smaller street gangs often steal cars, but lack the resources to resell them properly. They typically turn them over to chop shops on the cheap, or else take them for lengthy joy rides before abandoning them. Organized syndicates, however, have much more extensive operations, stealing and reselling thousands of cars every year.

Professional car thieves often have specific agendas, looking for particular vehicles to fill an order or a general demand. Luxury cars are preferred, but anything new or in good condition is a potential target. Security alarms and the like don't exist in the *Edge of Midnight* era; stout door locks are the only thing keeping a potential thief out of the driver's seat. Various forms of lock picks (including the infamous slim jim) can gain entry in a few short seconds, and any thief worth his salt can hot-wire a vehicle in the blink of an eye. Once a car is taken, it's driven to a chop shop, where it can be broken down and refitted. The license plates and identification are removed, the car is repainted, and general modifications are made such as swapping out the engine or adding new seats. Once the car has been refitted, it is sent to a buyer or marketed through underground channels. Many chop shops transport their "product" to different cities, using trailer trucks with false identification papers to disguise their origins. The lack of coordination between civic police reduces the risk considerably, and the NLEB rarely troubles with the transport racket so long as it's subtle.

The profitability of such operations is high. Costs for outfitting stolen cars are fairly minimal, and the finished vehicle can be resold below market cost with little trouble. The main difficulty comes in outfitting the car with clean license plates, and that can be achieved with equipment found in any metal shop. The chances of an owner ever getting his stolen car back are minimum in the extreme, and very little violence is entailed. Of course, chop shops require a great deal of space and equipment; a police raid on one can prove quite costly. But vehicles will always be in demand, and the skills required to refit a stolen automobile are not hard to learn. Most syndicates can re-form a broken auto-theft ring in the space of a few short weeks.

### Scenario Ideas

- The characters are tasked to steal a car with a particular set of hard-to-find traits. The one they find belongs to a friend or ally, who will not look kindly on the loss of his prized set of wheels.
- The characters steal a car, only to find a body, a suitcase full of money, or something similar in the trunk. They must either dispose of what they've found without drawing attention to themselves, or hope that the owner doesn't show up looking for it.
- The characters must transport a trailer full of refitted stolen cars from one city to another. Unbeknownst to them, one of the former owners has tasked a motorcycle gang to get his vehicle back for him... and to dispose of the remainder, along with the characters.
- The characters must steal a specific (though hardly uncommon) type of car and plant it at an undiscovered crime scene. When they arrive, they find the police there ahead of them, forcing them to plant the car and flee under the cops' noses.

## FINANCIAL SCAMS

As organized crime has grown in complexity, their schemes have brushed with those of legitimate businesses. Mobs will often ape the strategies of legal companies, while ignoring the laws and ethical standards which govern straight business. In the process, they strengthen the façade of honesty while perpetrating the worst sort of theft and embezzlement. Specifics can vary widely, but a few standard examples follow.

A favored form of business fraud entails opening a restaurant or similar company, then using it as a front to steal supplies. The mob orders a great deal of food, liquor, and the like under the auspices of their new "business," then simply fails to pay for the goods when they arrive. When the heat gets turned up, they close down the business and move elsewhere, having absconded with numerous shipments of free goods which can then be sold at 100% profit. When investigators arrive, they find only an empty storefront, and the bilked companies often have no choice but to absorb the loss. Particularly nosy creditors can be scared off by a display of force, as the syndicate's goon squad can "persuade" the investigator to keep the mob's names and location a secret.

Stocks and bonds provide numerous opportunities for criminal profit as well. By buying stock at a low price and intimidating stockbrokers into pumping up the value, they can make a quick buck with very little effort. The brokers use high-pressure tactics to rope other investors and their perceived eagerness helps convince others that the stock is worth more than it actually is. When the mobsters dump the stock, it takes a precipitous tumble, often catching other investors off-guard. The criminals have their money and the stock is worth nothing. The U.C.'s financial capital of New Eden is seeing increased incidents of such stock manipulation, as local criminals grow more organized and out-of-town syndicates start picking up on the trick. The same tactic is sometimes used at racetracks, where bookmakers will place bogus wagers in order to lower the odds of a long-shot horse.

In this field as nowhere else, the legal and illegal worlds intermingle. Though cold-blooded killers perpetrate financial scams more often than straight businessmen, their efforts are only marginally worse than "honest" brokers who use inside knowledge and other dirty tricks to maximize their profits. Mobsters often view the businessmen they rope in as weaker versions of themselves — versions which simply lack the force of will to do any *real* moneymaking.

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

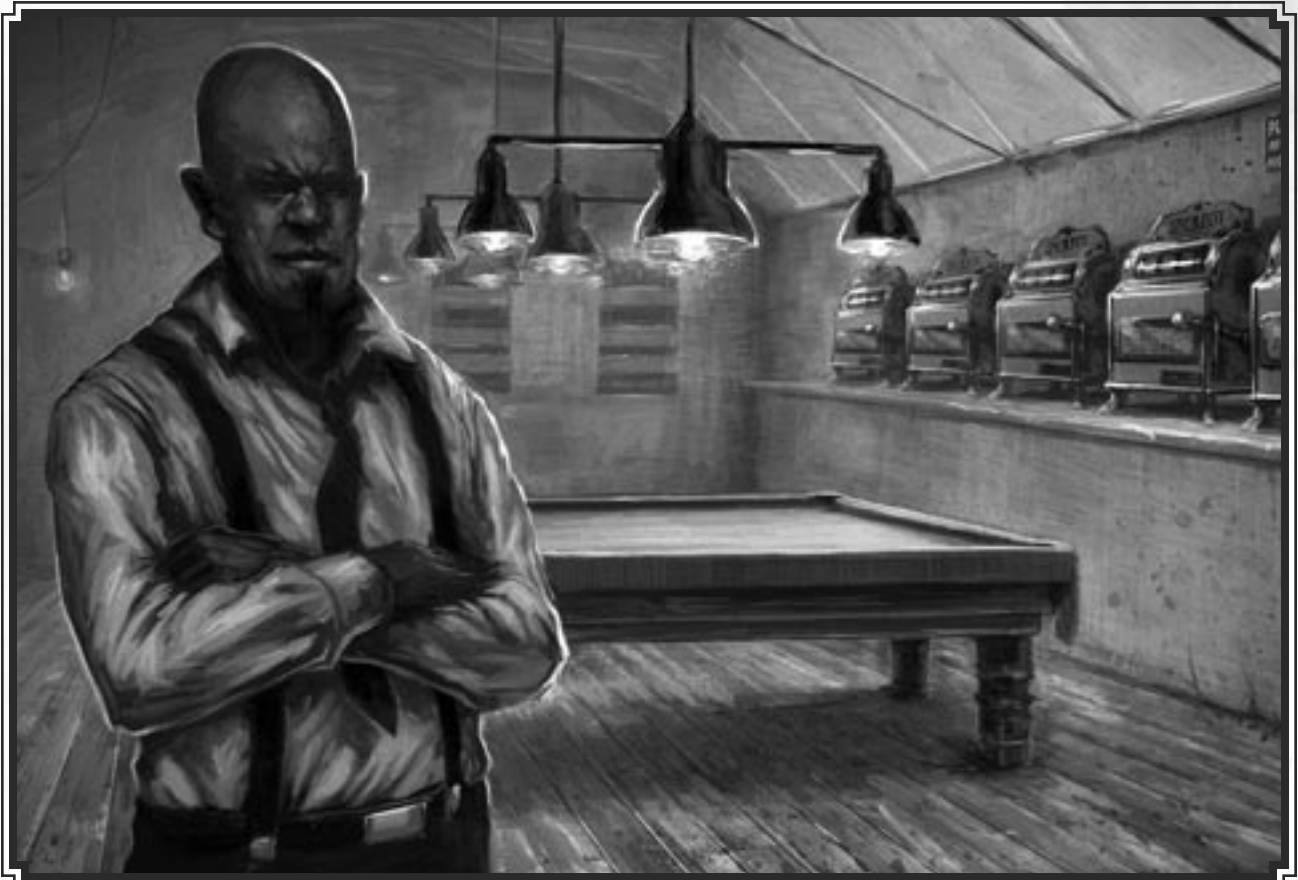
### Scenario Ideas

- The characters are working a string of horse races, fixing the odds for the local bookmakers. A rival criminal spots what they are doing and threatens to inform the police if they don't cut him in for a piece. Do they acquiesce to his demands? If so, what happens when the bookie finds out? If not, how do they get rid of him without blowing the operation out of the water?
- The syndicate instigates a complicated financial scheme involving a crooked broker driving down the price of certain stocks. At the last minute, however, the broker gets cold feet and the organization is left holding the bag. The characters must find out why the man did it (before killing him, of course); he wouldn't dare cross the organization unless someone else were behind him...
- A mob-owned restaurant has reached the end of the line, and the characters are asked to burn it down (the syndicate intends to collect the insurance money). They must set up the arson carefully to avoid any suspicion. While preparing the fire, they discover a huge cache of liquor and other supplies, which the restaurant's manager had deliberately been withholding from his syndicate masters. Do they keep the supplies for themselves and sell them on the sly? Or inform their boss and let the hapless manager suffer the consequences?

### GAMBLING AND PROSTITUTION

Gambling is illegal in the U.C. outside of Paradiso, but the public's passion for games of chance cannot be so easily regulated. Organized crime rapidly rose to fill in the demand, opening underground casinos where anyone could lay their money down on a spin of the wheel or the outcome of the latest horse race. Card houses and roulette games are relatively inexpensive to run, and the profits can be staggering. Millions of people are more than happy to bet their salary on the long-shot chance of striking it rich. And if handled properly, it need not even be rigged: a square game can make just as much money as a crooked one without scaring off any potential customers. Gambling has quickly become a staple of most organized crime operations, and betting parlors as elaborate as any Paradiso hotel can be found in every city. You simply have to know which door to knock on.

Formal gambling operations include card games, roulette wheels and slot machines, all of which can be set up easily. Syndicates also take copious bets on sporting events, and bookmakers keep track of every race, boxing match, and ballgame upon which their clientele wagers. Most organizations have the funds to cover any winnings, and losers are encouraged to pay up with all deliberate speed. One particularly insidious form of gambling is the numbers racket, a sort of privately-owned lottery wherein a certain combination of numbers — winners of horse races, scores of a ballgame, the



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

closing figures of the local stock exchange, etc. — produces a cash winner. Because it's controlled by the mob, there need not be a pay-off when the winning number isn't predicted exactly, and any money put into it goes directly into their pockets.

Legal forms of gambling are even better as far as syndicates are concerned. The casinos of Paradiso, and offshore meccas like Iberana (see *The Naked City*, page 156) provide the perfect cover for money laundering, as well as considerable sources of income. The mobs can skim money off the top without alerting revenuers, and the "respectability" of a legitimately run business can do much to enhance their reputation. Many eastern mobs have controlling interests in Paradiso's biggest casinos, while Iberana and other Borderlands nations have received a great deal of support from the cartels of Terminus.

Prostitution is a similarly lucrative enterprise, culling millions of dollars per annum in illicit sexual activity. Mob-controlled brothels, smut peddlers, and purveyors of pornography sell their wares to countless men eager for a walk on the wild side. The girls forced to work in these industries are often in desperate straits: impoverished and broken, kept in virtual slavery at the whims of their pimps. Many are abducted from the Borderlands or indentured in exchange for the cost of passage to the U.C. Other "high class" operations take a more benevolent approach; the call girls they employ enjoy protection from arrest or from abusive johns who don't know when to stop. In exchange, the syndicate claims the vast bulk of their earnings, adding it to the cash amassed from their other endeavors. Even those outside the mob's direct control end up contributing. "Freelance" prostitutes and their associates must often pay protection money from the local mob or else risk fearsome repercussions.

The money made on both gambling operations and prostitution is a tent pole for most mobs, and can bankroll numerous other activities such as narcotics smuggling and stock market manipulation. The police view both types of crime as "victimless": harmless vices which harm no one and which can be placed on the back burner in light of more immediate threats. Such relative neglect leaves criminal organizations free to pursue these interests at will... and generate money to spend on far less tolerable endeavors.

## Scenario Ideas

- The characters are tasked with establishing a new underground casino on another syndicate's turf. They must assemble the proper supplies, take care of the cops, and handle the inevitable repercussions when the rival organization gets wind of it.
- A shark or con artist has taken one of the syndicate's card dens for all it's worth. The characters must find some way of getting the money back without exposing the fact that the syndicate is welshing on its payouts.
- A prostitute from one of the syndicate's brothels comes to the characters and asks for help. She wants out of the life, but the syndicate won't let her leave. Will the characters help her escape, or turn her back over to their bosses?

- The characters are given a great deal of money, which they must launder through one of the organization's legal casinos (in Paradiso, Iberana, or some similar locale). Once they get there, a mistimed lucky streak takes hold and they can't lose for winning so much. How can they get rid of this money in a way which won't alert their Don's suspicions?

## NARCOTICS

Though drugs have always been a part of U.C. society, they have only recently become a factor in organized crime. Many illicit substances (such as cocaine) were legally sold for medicinal purposes before their detrimental side effects became known. Morphine and similar drugs have been used in medical practice for some time, and Asian communities still see heavy opium use (a practice which began back in the days of the Empire of the Golden Sun). As the U.C. grows less tolerant of these chemicals — and as their devastating effects on the human body are understood more fully — users are forced to go underground to receive their dosage. Various criminal mobs are rapidly learning the value of trafficking in them. Driven by addiction, the customer base is a reliable source of cash, and the market looks to grow exponentially in the coming years.

The most difficult part of the process is getting the drugs into the country. While laboratories and remote farms exist within the Unified Commonwealth, the bulk of illicit drugs comes from beyond its borders. Opium derivatives hail mainly from the Empire of the Golden Sun, while the Borderlands exports a copious supply of heroin, cocaine, and marijuana. The U.C.'s harbors are major embarkation points for imported narcotics, and the focal point of much police attention. The syndicate which control the harbors — and similar locales like the train stations of Central City — has a great deal of influence on which shipments get in and which are caught. In addition, the nation's southern border is far too wide to patrol effectively, and smugglers who know the territory can import thousands of pounds of narcotics annually. Many of them use ingenious methods of disguising their product, from mixing it in with harmless substances to hiding it in balloons which are then swallowed by couriers and regurgitated (or passed) at a later date.

Once they reach the Commonwealth, the drugs can be passed on to customers through a variety of channels. Street dealers sell them to poverty-stricken junkies, while insiders in the music and film industry peddle them to more exclusive clientele. Procuring the drugs usually falls to the syndicate's lieutenants, who then delegate their footmen to distribute it. Not only does it ensure the rapid dispersal of the drugs, but it also prevents the higher-ups in the organization from taking the fall should the police become involved.



## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

The risks are enough to give more cautious organizations pause, however; prison terms can be substantial and the NLEB has taken an interest in punishing traffickers under national smuggling laws. Growing violence for control of the market is quite vicious, even for organized crime, and the horrifying effects of drugs on those who use them is enough to trouble even the most hardened killers. “Honorable” organizations often refuse to handle drugs at all, using their tenuous criminal morality to wash their hands of the filthy business. In addition, many Dons strictly penalize mob members for using drugs themselves; more than a few weak footmen have been left face down in a trash bin after indulging in the wrong sort of recreation.

Despite that, the demand for narcotics is always high on the mean streets, and the money to be made can tempt even the most stalwart criminal soul. Those who refuse to deal drugs on principle may soon find themselves struggling against stronger, more ruthless syndicates who now have a huge amount of money to throw against their rivals...

### Scenario Ideas

- The characters’ Don — who has vocally opposed involvement in any sort of narcotics — asks the characters to transport an anonymous bag across the border. Either through mishap or deliberate curiosity, the bag is opened to reveal a large shipment of heroin. Can the characters get rid of it without incurring the Don’s wrath?
- A new drug den has opened in the organization’s turf, bringing with it increased violence and heightened police scrutiny. The characters must shut down the party. They may use whatever means they see fit, but the drug den must be closed... preferably without drawing any further attention to the area.
- The Don’s son (or another close relative) reveals a dark secret: he’s become an addict and is terrified that his father will find out. He asks the characters to help him come clean, promising to turn his dealers over to them if they assist him.
- A young gang paying protection to the characters’ syndicate has begun dealing drugs. The Don warns them off, but they continue their activities, and the money they bring in allows them to grow very big very quickly. The characters must find a way to cut off their source before they become too big and launch a war against the rest of the syndicate.

### PROTECTION, EXTORTION, AND LOAN SHARKING

The protection racket is one of the easiest and most direct ways for a mob to accumulate money. The process is simple: a storekeeper or outside business is approached with an offer of protection. By making monthly payments, the business can stay on the mob’s good side, and thus be safe from any accidents or misfortunes which might befall it. Naturally, such accidents are usually caused by the mob itself should a given victim fail

to come up with his month’s quota. Product can be intercepted and destroyed, legbreakers sent to menace the customers, and in extreme cases, arsonists might burn the place down. Larger companies must pay up to ensure that their cargo is loaded and unloaded safely, while mob-controlled unions can force work stoppages if payment isn’t received. Most businessmen would rather pay than risk losing their livelihood entirely.

Protection rackets help a mob exert control over a local neighborhood, ruling it as effectively as any feudal king. Occasionally, it pays dividends to the storeowners as well; few independents would dare rob a business under mob protection and those who do often live to regret it. For freelance criminals who don’t have the police to turn to, paying protection is the only guarantee of safety they have. Crooks who pay off to a syndicate can turn to them for justice if a rival causes trouble or the police come sniffing too closely. Despite such dubious benefits, however, protection rackets are tantamount to civic blackmail: robbery attained by the threat of violence as naked as a mugger sticking a gun in your ribs.

In addition, many mobs engage in loan sharking, whereby they lend money at an exorbitantly high interest rate. If one cannot borrow from a bank or reliable creditor, a loan shark may represent the only way to procure the necessary funds. Naturally, it only leads to bigger problems, as the shark continues to demand money at progressively higher interest rates. Those who can’t pay are brutalized or even killed, and their families may suffer as well if the “creditors” are nasty enough. This tactic works particularly well against the poor, who can be enticed by small loans which quickly balloon into gigantic payments. Loan sharks often bribe or coerce bank officials to get lists of rejected applicants or clients who have failed to keep up with their payments. They then approach these poor souls as guardian angels, promising to solve all their problems with a single stroke of a pen. They often appear as kind, concerned, and considerate during the initial phases. Only when the deed is done do they drop the façade and reveal their true colors.

Most of these activities carry with them a sheen of legitimacy. They allow the syndicate to take money through a “business arrangement” rather than simple robbery. Mobsters could achieve the same short-term ends simply by sticking a gun in their victims’ nose, but by cloaking it in the veneer of an agreement, they are able to leverage money over an extended period of time, bleeding their victims anew each month. It also gives them a faux respectability, allowing them to appear as professional businessmen instead of just bullying thugs.





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## Scenario Ideas

- Someone paying protection to the organization has been robbed, and is screaming bloody murder about it. The characters need to find the thieves and make them pay before the cops get to them first (and leave them to the relative safety of a jail cell).
- One of the characters is deep in debt to a loan shark, and the situation is getting worse. He needs to settle the loan quickly or trouble will result. How will the characters come up with the money... or do they plan on defying the loan shark and convincing him to stand down?
- A smaller gang affiliated with the organization has stopped paying protection money and gone into hiding. The characters must flush them out and get them to see the error of their ways.

## RACKETEERING

Criminal syndicates have a long history of association with organized labor... both beneficial and detrimental. The formation of labor unions led to a great deal of unrest between employers and the workers beneath them — unrest which criminal organizations could exploit. To management, they offered strikebreakers who could intimidate workers into returning to their jobs. To unions, they offered the same muscle-bound thugs to protect their rallies and serve as bodyguards. Eventually, mobs became indispensable to labor relations and made a tidy profit off of both sides. With their foot in the door, they could then use labor unions for their own purposes, controlling entire industries through proxy leaders and other shady connections.

Racketeering strikes most easily at the distribution of goods and services, which are essential to any complex industry. By controlling the trucking unions, mobsters can withhold raw materials from a factory or charge exorbitant rates for safe delivery. By dictating the frequency of strikes, they have a powerful weapon to influence management, eliciting periodic shakedowns to keep things moving. Union pensions and workers' compensation funds can be looted with impunity, lining the pockets of the mob bosses instead of helping out the union members who sometimes desperately need it. In some cases, the syndicate can negotiate specific labor contracts, earning fat kickbacks on public works projects and the like while cutting costs by using shoddy materials and poorly paid workers. Control of labor also pays a political dividend as well, since union endorsements can spell thousands of votes for the right candidate.

Smuggling and hijacking are also facilitated through the labor rackets. Union members can inform mobsters of prime shipments to hit, while stolen goods can quietly be eliminated from any incriminating paperwork, masking all signs of the theft. On the other side of the coin, stolen goods can easily be absorbed into larger shipments, making their transport and sale infinitely easier. Truck drivers belonging to mob-controlled unions will often give up their cargo without a



## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

### HIJACKING

Truck hijacking is the continuation of a lengthy criminal tradition that dates back to the caravans of the ancient world. Organized crime has a huge advantage in hijacking because of its connection to the labor unions. Connected mobsters can seize the choicest shipments, leaving lesser gangs to work by trial and error or short-term tip-offs.

A hijacking begins when a fingerman (an informant within the shipping firm or in some similar position) alerts the mob to a lucrative shipment. The syndicate gets the schedule, routes, and likely cargo, as well as the type of vehicle making the shipment (including the license number if possible). They then establish a good location to seize the goods. If the driver is in on the heist, he can simply stop at the chosen spot. Otherwise, he must be induced to stop. A favored method is faking an auto accident: using a stalled car to block the road and waving down the driver under the pretext of asking for help. Other groups use a phony motorcycle cop, who pulls the truck over for some alleged infraction. Detour signs can also be used with good results, forcing the truck to a dead end or cul-de-sac where the gang can then approach at their leisure. Only the most daring will try to take a truck that is in motion; such an act involves the use of multiple cars and gang members who don't mind leaping from moving vehicles to the truck. Such tactics are more popular with motorcycle gangs rather than those working for established syndicates.

Once the vehicle is stopped, the driver is incapacitated or pulled away. Those on the take do so voluntarily, while others require coercion. He is usually tied up and then either placed in one of the hijackers' cars or tossed in the back of his own truck. Some are simply left stranded on the side of the road, though that's fairly uncommon in the isolated wastes of the Commonwealth. The cargo will either be transferred to another truck, or else one of the gang members will drive the truck to a pre-arranged drop point for transfer. The driver will be held until the transfer is complete, at which point he will be released in some remote locale and left to call the police. Those in on the plan will usually be dropped off directly at a phone with a pre-established story as soon as their accomplices have completed the transfer.

With the cargo in hand, the hijackers will then proceed to dispose of the truck; in the most benign cases (i.e., those with the company's or union's approval), they will simply wipe it down for fingerprints and remove all traces of their presence before leaving it at a rest stop or some similar location. Otherwise, they will either strip it for parts or set it ablaze, destroying any incriminating evidence in the process.

Selling the goods is remarkably easy. Most syndicates will use established fences who don't ask questions and have buyers lined up easily. Fences can even "place orders," specifying a specific product intended for a particular buyer (the hijacking is subsequently planned around acquiring that product). In some cases, the gang simply sells the material out of the back of their truck, trusting police pay-offs and neighborhood indifference to keep out of trouble. Certain products such as liquor or cigarettes can be distributed through mob-owned businesses, masking their origins and providing the syndicate with easy profits. In a rare few cases, the mob will make direct use of the products they hijack. Guns and ammunition are the most obvious examples, but cars are sometimes taken as well (often to be used in other crimes and then abandoned).

fight, preferring to hand over the goods rather than cause trouble. Mobsters can then sell the goods at a severe markdown, pocketing the entirety as pure profit. In some cases, they sell their wares right off the back of the truck, counting on police indifference and the eagerness of their customers (many of whom are law-abiding citizens placated with the shoddiest explanations) to get away with it.

The link between legitimate labor concerns and criminal elements is often nebulous. Sleazy or below-the-belt activities may be accepted as the price of doing business, while mob syndicates — despite their parasitic goals — can be beneficial for those unions willing to look the other way. Union leadership enjoys extra money from mob pay-offs, and the presence of a few dozen bruisers can make all the difference during a lengthy strike. The cost of mob interference can often be passed on to the consumer, leaving the unions and their members relatively untouched. For example, a pay-off made to ensure that a truckload of vegetables arrives on time can simply be added to the market price, turning mob blackmail

into the simple cost of goods. Labor influence also grants criminal syndicates a further veneer of legitimacy, while providing an excellent means of money laundering through otherwise above-board union businesses. Individual union members risk a great deal if they complain, since collective bargaining is often the only weapon they have against their employers. Most will grudgingly submit to criminal demands, believing it better than the alternative. And all the while, the syndicates continue to generate more funds earned on the backs of hard-working men and women who could very easily do without such "partners."

### Scenario Ideas

- A local company has set up union breakers to disrupt its employees' attempts to organize. The nascent union has asked the syndicate to step in and protect them during a planned work strike. The characters must keep the workers' leadership safe and ensure that management's hired goons don't break up the protests.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

- A factory owned by one of the city's wealthiest scions has refused to pay the mob, and now must be taught a lesson. The characters need to intercept a series of five shipments, bound for different parts of the country at different times, and ensure that the trucks never reach their destination.
- A longshoreman on the take has leaked word of a large gold shipment arriving in the city's harbor or waterway. The characters stand to make a fortune if they can figure out how to abscond with the precious metal — preferably without anyone being aware of the crime.

## SMUGGLING

The national government of the Unified Commonwealth views liquor, cigarettes, and similar items as luxuries rather than necessities. They tend to tax such goods quite heavily, seeing it as a good way to generate income. It didn't take organized crime long to realize that you could make a great deal of money by simply dodging those taxes. Transporting truckloads of untaxed alcohol or tobacco products allows them to sell the goods at a drastic markdown while still making a tidy profit. In order to do that, however, they need to get it past the right officials and directly into the hands of consumers.

Some mob crews will buy up wholesale products, and then use phony tax stamps to disguise them. Professional counterfeiters often possess such stamps, and the crew which owns them can make a lot of money putting them to use. Other groups discard even these rudimentary tactics, selling products nakedly bereft of government taxation. With their control of the unions, mobs can easily smuggle untaxed goods into any city in the country via trucking firms and train lines. They use a wide variety of techniques to hide their goods from the authorities, ranging from packing the untaxed products behind a single row of taxed goods to secret compartments hidden in ordinary packing crates.

Many smuggled products also come from the Borderlands, bypassing the rigorous tariffs imposed by the U.C. on most imported goods. Fruits, liquor, diamonds, precious metals, molasses, and countless other exotic products can be transported via ship or slipped across the Sola Diablo desert into the southern Commonwealth. Borderlands businesses can make substantial profits bypassing U.C. tariffs; all they need to do is drive a truck or pilot a boat north and have someone on the other end to pick up the goods. The haphazard state of Borderlands law enforcement means that most police resources are diverted elsewhere, and the U.C. underworld is more than happy to help distribute the goods when they arrive. Busts are sometimes made — leading to spectacular confrontations and messy shootouts — but the U.C. is simply too big to effectively guard its borders against such smuggling.



Some forms of smuggling, however, are far more insidious than a few truckloads of cigarettes or a boat full of bananas. Human cargo can be moved as well. From the shores of the Golden Empire to the jungles of Belatacan, immigrants come to the U.C. in search of a better life. Many are horribly disappointed. Snakeheads and unscrupulous boat owners charge thousands of dollars to facilitate their passage. Once they arrive, they are often turned over to local criminals, who press them into service in sweatshops or prostitution rings. They're maintained in a state of near-slavery, forced to work in appalling conditions to pay off their "debts," while the proceeds from their work goes into the hands of the mobsters who control them. Most of them don't speak English and have little knowledge of the laws and customs of the Unified Commonwealth. They could find help if only they knew how to ask for it... something their criminal overlords go to great lengths to prevent.

While human slavery is a harsh crime undertaken by only the most callous and brutal organizations, other less reprehensible forms of smuggling are easy moneymakers. Bribing a border agent or commerce official gives him a financial stake in keeping the lines of illicit commerce open, and customers rarely ask questions when the prices are so low. The police often have more important matters to attend to and public indifference means shorter prison sentences for those who get caught. From the syndicates' point of view, smuggling has very few downsides.

## Scenario Ideas

- A syndicate smuggler, bringing in a cache of diamonds from across the country, has gone missing. The characters must retrace his steps and relocate the missing funds.
- The hijacking of a rival organization's truck uncovers a surprise — instead of the expected cigarettes, the truck contains a dozen illegal immigrants, bound for some inner city sweatshop. The characters must decide whether to assist the human cargo or to exploit them for their own purposes.
- A rich collector will pay millions for a living specimen of a rare flower from the Borderlands. The characters have a line on one, but they will need to devise a way to slip it across the border — and keep it alive — before they can claim the money. And of course, they're not the only ones who are interested in the collector's offer...
- The characters must slip a fugitive member of their organization out of the city and to the border before the police find him. In addition, another mob is hoping to eliminate him before he can escape — reparation for a defeat he dealt them some time ago. The characters will need to dodge hit men's bullets as well as roadblocks, sniffing dogs, and the National Law Enforcement Bureau before all is said and done.

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

### VIOLENCE

Regardless of how or where they earn their money, all mobsters are willing to use violence to enforce their will. Beatings are an established part of their *modus operandi*, and those who intrude too much into their business will be murdered without hesitation. Violence also marks power struggles within a par-

ticular syndicate, as capos and lieutenants jockey for position beneath their Don. (The rulings of the Don are sometimes all that prevent active bloodshed.) Similarly, feuds between rival organizations can often escalate, leading to bloody mob wars with dozens of dead on each side. Central City and Terminus see regular clashes among their ruling crime families, and the best the police can do is keep as many innocents as possible out of the line of fire.

Mobsters are generally brutal characters, with no compunctions about harming their fellow man. They resort to fisticuffs at the drop of a hat, and killing a rival means no more to them than killing a fly. Mob king Jack Drago — possibly the most powerful criminal in the U.C. — has a murderous temper and has been known to beat underlings unconscious for talking out of turn. Nonetheless, most violence within criminal organizations serves one of two specific purposes: coercion and elimination. Both exist primarily to further the syndicate's fortunes, giving rise to the famous adage that mob violence is strictly professional.

Coercion is used to compel victims into going along with the mobster's wishes. It is often painful and very menacing, but it is rarely lethal. It usually entails a simple "working over": a beating or physical punishment designed for maximum emotional impact. Fingers and hands are sometimes broken, while other instances leave swollen eyes or nasty cuts on victims' faces. In most cases, they not only maximize the victim's pain and humiliation, but also leave ample evidence for others to see. Like any other Machiavellian maneuver, coercion is intended to extend one's influence beyond the direct recipient. Shopkeepers who see one of their fellows with a broken arm toe the line that much quicker. Rivals and potential adversaries will see that the syndicate is not to be trifled with. Underlings will know how far their superior is willing to go to enforce his will. All of it serves as a form of power, strengthening the syndicate's hold on all those who witness or are told about it. Not only will they be more inclined to obey the mob's wishes, they will be less willing to turn on them if an opportunity presents itself. In that sense, it can often be quite cruel, lasting for hours or causing permanent scars and injuries. The more horrifyingly memorable, the better.





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Elimination, on the other hand is usually more practical. It takes place because someone has become an obstacle to the syndicate's plans and needs to be removed. A bullet between the eyes ensures that the problem will never come back again. As far as the mobs are concerned, a hit needs only to finish off its intended target at an absolute minimum of risk to the trig-

## THE PROCESS OF MONEY LAUNDERING

Money laundering is a method whereby illicitly gained funds are disguised to appear as legal profits. It helps to hide evidence of criminal activity and allows syndicates to enjoy the fruits of their labors without worrying about prosecution.

Money laundering consists of three specific steps:

**1) Placement:** Placement is the initial insertion of "dirty" money into the system. It's used to fund a legitimate business of some sort or to make a legitimate purchase. Methods are varied, but are always designed to avoid attention. One popular method involves betting (and losing) large amounts of money at a mob-run casino. Another involves making multiple small deposits in a bank or securities firm. High-priced luxury items such as cars or yachts can also start the placement process: they are quickly bought and then resold again at close to the same price. Regardless of the method, however, the end result is the same — the illegal funds are now in the legitimate banking system and can move to the next stage of the process.

Paradiso and New Eden are the two most popular cities for the placement of laundered funds: Paradiso for its legalized gambling operations, New Eden for its powerful financial institutions and for the jewelry district in Hart Beach.

**2) Layering:** Once the illicit money has been placed with legitimate sources, it is held or stockpiled while it waits to be integrated. It is often subjected to a series of complex transactions which form "layers" concealing its criminal origins. Layering can take many forms, but often entails the use of dummy corporations that exist only as a mailing address and perhaps an empty office. The Borderlands is a prime location for such shell companies — lying as it does beyond the jurisdiction of U.C. investigators — and large Borderlands cities are full of "businesses" which exist solely to obfuscate dirty money. When the layering process is concluded, it's extremely difficult to trace the funds back to their source.

**3) Integration:** With the money now layered, it can then be recovered by its criminal owners and converted back into usable assets. Often, they're used to invest in real estate (which the criminal can then buy up at a reduced rate), or intermingled with legitimate money in a restaurant or some other business. If done properly, the illegal money is now utterly indistinguishable from the legal profits, and the criminal may spend it to his heart's content without fear of repercussions.

german. The infamous "drive by" shootings are an offshoot of this, as the killer simply pulls up in the back of a car, fills his target with lead, and speeds away. Bombs and poison are favored methods of assassination as well, while a good deceptive story can get a target close enough to kill with a small caliber handgun. (Internal conflicts are marked with deceit, as victims will be summoned somewhere under false pretenses and hit when their guard is down.) Firearms are preferred because they're usually permanent and can be disposed of without leaving a trace. Car bombs and the like are efficient, but tougher to obtain and more easily traceable, while poisons and melee weapons such as knives are usually less reliable than guns. Mob hits rarely make efforts to disguise the crime; as with coercion, the more pronounced a hit, the more readily it will cow troublemakers and potential rivals.

While professional hit men are sometimes contacts for special circumstances, most mob violence falls to the foot soldiers to carry out. These "button men" are skilled in firearms and have little moral compunction about killing, but rarely possess the imagination to improvise. They tend to hit fast and hard, leaving as little evidence as possible in their wake and making sure they've finished the job. Should the target prove wilier or more tenacious than they expect, they usually either fall back and retreat, or rely on raw firepower to blast their victim dead. Coercion tactics are similarly blunt, evincing a bully's knack for sadism, but rarely progressing beyond that. Anything requiring more finesse is either relegated to a capo (usually one trained in such matters) or left to an independent hit man.

While crimes of passion are not uncommon with organized criminals, Dons usually frown on them as an unnecessary risk — putting one's emotions ahead of the group is never good for business. Nevertheless, casual violence is often a way of life with career mobsters, which can lead to ill-conceived and foolish conflicts both within and outside of a given syndicate. Dons spend a great deal of their time maintaining the peace — both between organizations and within their own ranks — and most syndicates have a series of rules specifically designed to curb their members' thuggish tendencies.

## MOB CULTURE

Belonging to a mob means living outside of the law, beholden only to your Don and the Darwinian necessities of the street. Though they behave the same as any other Commonwealth citizen in many ways, they belong to their own unique subculture, with its own rules and traditions. A wise guy can't go to the police if he has a problem, for example; nor can he declare his earnings or place them in a bank the way a normal citizen would. Yet despite his criminal lifestyle, he's still bound by a definable code which governs both his behavior and the behavior of his fellows. Every organization requires a structure which must be adhered to; criminal syndicates are no different. This section details the ins and outs of mob culture, how its members interact with each other, and the lifestyles practiced by those in their line of work.

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

### ETHNICITY

The U.C. has fewer barriers between ethnic groups than our world did. Immigrants have assimilated more readily into the larger society, and the prejudice faced by ethnic minorities in the United States is far less prominent in the Commonwealth. Because of this, it's more common to see criminal syndicates of mixed ethnic heritage, rather than the classic monolithic ethnicities of the movies and TV. Dons with Irish or Italian surnames will lead capos of Asian, African, or Anglo ancestry, bond together only by oaths of loyalty and the knowledge that leaving the organization is tantamount to a death sentence.

Which isn't to say that ethnic-specific groups don't exist. Many syndicates form in particular neighborhoods where a single ethnicity dominates, and many others are drawn together by similar circumstances, which sometimes includes their status as minorities. This is especially true of the gaunts, whose peculiar condition makes prejudice against them far more acute than other minorities. Though some gaunts appear in mixed syndicates — generally as muscle — the number of gaunts-only syndicates is much higher than any other group. Gateway's Tongs and Triads are another prominent example, bred by the insular culture of the Empire of the Golden Sun and bound by their own unique set of codes. (More on gaunts can be found in the second half of this book, while a discussion of the Gateway Tongs begins on page 77.)

With fewer blood ties, Commonwealth syndicates place a high value on individual loyalty, and on the commitment of their membership. Codes of conduct are strictly enforced and betrayal is met with fierce reprisals. Members of mixed syndicates find themselves bound to each other far more tightly than they would if they shared a common heritage. No one is taken for granted within their ranks, which means that when they do earn their colleagues' trust, it's considered more precious than gold.

The only group generally excluded from syndicate membership is women; the structure of most organizations is remarkably old-fashioned, and while wives and daughters constitute a large part of mob lives, they remain isolated from the inner workings of their husbands' activities. "Women have no business in the business," as one prominent gangster put it, making organized crime far more anachronistic than other institutions. The occasional exceptions (such Terminus's Widows of Fortune gang) only make the rule stand out all the more.



### JOINING A MOB

There are few hard and fast rules to joining a particular organization, though a handful of general trends prevail. Direct family members often follow their elder kin into the business; sons and nephews are usually permitted into their relatives' crew with nary a second glance. Petty criminals who show a knack for making money, splinter gangs with an affiliation to the organization, and local youths who aspire to join the organization also make prime candidates. Successful crews favor those with a head for business rather than simply a willingness to use violence as a tool. Thugs and torpedoes are a dime a dozen, but a proven breadwinner is a tremendous asset to any self-respecting organization.

Most syndicates watch a candidate for some time before making him a formal offer. Prospective members usually work as foot soldiers or in other associated positions, serving the mob without actually belonging. Though considered connected, they are not formal members of the syndicate... and are therefore expendable. In more brutal organizations, the prospective member must kill someone — or at least express a willingness to do so — at the behest of his Don before he can be considered for membership. Besides affirming the candidate's loyalty, it also gives the syndicate something to hold over him in case he ever has second thoughts.

Once the syndicate's leadership decides to induct a new member, he is "made" — or formally initiated into the organization — and henceforth considered untouchable by other elements of the underworld. Made men are selected for their loyalty, their commitment to the organization, and their ability to fulfill the wishes of their Don. Once someone is made, he is a part of the organization unto death. A blow against one of them is a blow against the entire syndicate; lengthy gang wars have been started over the mistaken assassination of a single made man.

Initiation rituals vary from syndicate to syndicate, though they all have some means of acknowledging the recipient's new status. Terminus syndicates often use tattoos, a habit which started in prison and reverberated outward as various organizations increased their hold on the city. Central City's crime lords use much less permanent means: usually a ceremony wherein the recipient swears an oath of fealty to whichever Don stands at the head of the organization. Gateway mobs rely on informal agreements, while the gangsters of other large cities use unspoken assumptions that those in their syndicate will act in the best interests of their employers. Many newly made men will cut their finger or hand as a symbol of their commitment, then clasp the hand of their Don while swearing an oath of allegiance.

Made men tend to have more authority in a given mob than those without such status. They occupy the higher echelons of the syndicate, and can speak to their superiors with greater impunity. On the flip side, however, they must often take more responsibility when things go wrong. Their Don expects the best from them, and they dare not disappoint. Betraying an organization after a gangster has been made is unthinkable. Informants and turncoats from their ranks are murdered in the

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD



most savage manner — often suffering cruelly before they die — and sometimes immediate family members are put to death as well, as a warning to others. Criminal organizations depend on loyalty for their very survival and cannot take risks when it comes to the behavior of those they trust.

## MOB RULES

All organized syndicates follow a specific set of rules, designed to keep the mob intact and to prevent undue damage from the foolish actions of its members. As always, the exact details vary from group to group, as do the punishments for breaking the rules. All of them, however, obey some variation of the following basic dictates:

### 1) The Code of Silence

The word is *omertà*, a Sicilian term meaning “manliness.” It translates as a code of silence: refusing to speak of the syndicate business to anyone outside the syndicate. Never reveal what you have seen to anyone. Never rat on a fellow syndicate member. Never involve the police in any of your affairs. To do so is considered unmanly and weak: a violation of the code. Experienced wise guys are noted for their stoic and dignified demeanors, seeing much but offering little. This is an extension of the code: the mobster demonstrates his *omertà*

by choosing his words and actions carefully. Even mobsters without Mediterranean backgrounds understand the value of this term and learn to behave without tipping their hand to their enemies.

### 2) The Code of Honor

Walking hand-in-hand with *omertà* is the sense of *onore*, or honor. Mobsters place a high value on perception, and the implications of weakness or cowardice can spell doom for even the most powerful gangster. His position depends upon his willingness to defend his honor... with violence if necessary. Slightings and insults must be avenged; debts must always be repaid; challenges to one's power and dominance should never be refused. To do so risks everything: the underworld's fellow sharks are attracted to the smell of blood.

Loyalty is also a key part of *onore* — as exhibited by the Don to his underlings as much as they to him. Canny mob leaders will treat those beneath them like family: protecting their loved ones, attending their weddings and funerals, and so on. Doing so demonstrates that the Don appreciates the loyalty of his underlings, and that they can depend upon him for protection and aid.

Most of the other rules listed below extend from the basic notion of *onore*.

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

### 3) Obey Your Don Without Question

In exchange for his protection and the opportunities he provides, a Don expects absolute obedience. The syndicate comes before everything else in a wise guy's life: before family, before government, before faith in God. Whatever the Don says, goes, even if it means killing a family member or a friend. The inability to make one's will felt is a sure sign of losing power; those who don't follow the orders of their superiors will often be killed as an example.

### 4) Get Permission Before Doing Anything

The chain of command must be respected, and footmen shouldn't be engaged in any activities unless their capo knows what's going on. This includes outside business dealings, freelance crimes, leaving the city for any reason, and so on. Ostensibly, this avoids any unnecessary friction with rival organizations. In reality, it keeps the footmen from holding out on their superiors or from hiding any money which they'd earned independently and would rather not share.

### 5) Never Strike a Fellow Member

For the mobster, casual violence is a way of life, whether it be hospitalizing a shopkeeper who won't pay his dues or gunning down a rival at the behest of his Don. Because of this, it's easy to let friendly horseplay get out of control, as a few playful blows suddenly escalate into drawn weapons and raging tempers. As such, physical violence is frowned upon unless okayed by a higher-up. Usually, such incidents are resolved by the capo calling a meeting and getting the two combatants to shake hands and forget about it. Those who won't let it rest at that are usually killed before their "personal feud" tears the entire organization apart.

### 6) No Reprisals Against a Member's Family

Assuming that the mobster is obeying the tenets of *omertà*, he will not reveal anything about his actions to his family... which means that killing them serves no purpose save to antagonize him. In an effort to avoid such friction, a mobster's wife and family are considered immune from reprisals or violence of any sort. They are to be treated with the utmost respect and kept safe from harm if possible. This rule also applies to a mobster's mistress or extra-marital paramour, who is also considered family. Similarly, mobsters are forbidden from romantically pursuing another man's wife or mistress; not only does it risk a violent reprisal, but it's a stain on the offended man's honor even if he no longer cares who his women see on the side.

### 7) Avoid Blatant Signs of Wealth

For the Don, it's acceptable to dress well, have a nice car, and live in a fancy mansion. For his underlings, however, such trappings are red flags signaling a recent theft, heist, or knock-over — just the thing to bring the police thundering to their doorstep. While quiet signs of wealth are permitted, most senior mobsters frown on sudden appearances of expensive cars, furs, jewelry, or the like. The less a wise guy draws attention to himself, the better.

### 8) Don't Kill Prominent Members of the Legitimate Political or Law Enforcement Structure

While this rule may be rescinded in important cases, it's generally sacrosanct. Important political figures receive a great deal of public attention; if something were to happen to them, the public outcry would be overwhelming, creating untold problems for the organization. Similarly, high-ranking policemen are viewed as symbols of civic stability. Their deaths cause far more trouble than they're worth. District attorneys, newspaper editors, and other public elements of "law and order" are in the same boat. They may be bribed and threatened if necessary, but killing them solves little and brings down too much heat on the syndicate's head.

### 9) No Drugs

With the increase in narcotics trade, some syndicates have begun serious operations in dealing and smuggling illegal drugs. Others, however, maintain a strict ban on narcotics, unwilling to risk the law enforcement attention and extended prison time that drug trafficking entails. And regardless of

## NO SQUEALERS

The Drago mob of Central City has long been considered one of the most violent criminal organizations in the country, but the murder of police captain Jameson Struthers set a new standard even for them. Struthers — once thought to be in line for the chief's job — agreed to testify before the National Legislature regarding his connections to the Drago mob. He claimed that he had detailed knowledge of the inner workings of organized crime in Central City, and that his testimony could indict dozens of influential members of Jack Drago's crew. Their conviction threatened to devastate Drago's newly cemented power base, and leave him weak and vulnerable to the remainder of Central City's mobs.

The day before his train was scheduled to leave for Nova Roma, Captain Struthers was found murdered in his automobile. The interior was decorated with his blood and entrails, while his mangled corpse sat behind the wheel. The body of a pigeon was stuffed into his mouth, splitting his cheeks wide open. The car was found parked in the driveway of his home, and neither his wife nor his neighbors reported hearing anything unusual in the night. An all-out effort by the Central City PD nabbed a pair of killers: Ray "Tubbo" Tarcini and Maxwell O'Grady, both of whom had strong ties to the Drago mob. The two were found hanged in their respective cells the day after their arrest; their deaths were labeled as suicides and the case was closed. No other members of the Drago mob were ever implicated as a result.

More on Jack Drago and his crew can be found in the *Edge of Midnight* core rulebook and the *Naked City* sourcebook.



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

whether one sells it or not, it is almost universally forbidden for any mobsters to use drugs themselves. Drugs cloud judgment, slow the reflexes, and are devastatingly addictive... none of which a Don likes to see in his underlings. Those found high on drugs are usually given one warning. One. The first time there's a relapse, the offender ends up face down in the weeds.

For all the emphasis placed on these rules, however, they are noted almost as much for their lapses as their adherence. While some wise guys take the rules as scripture, many will turn on each other, spend cash like drunken sailors, finger important public figures for assassination, and deal drugs without a second thought. In many syndicates, the rules are less "don't do it" than "don't get caught." Only *omertà* is truly sacrosanct among the underworld: stool pigeons are killed without hesitation and everyone knows what will happen if they speak to outsiders about the organization. Anything else can be worked around; the only thing that matters is making money for the organization.

## POLITICAL CONNECTIONS

More than anything else, mobsters crave respect. Respect means power, which means control and the ability to protect their interests. Political power can be bought and sold as easily as any other commodity, and most established organizations seek out protection from elected officials and institutions like the police. Their connections help ensure that operations run smoothly, and provide Dons and underbosses with the respect they so keenly desire.

Political connections start with union influence, which can have a profound effect on public elections. Organized labor officials in a mob's pocket can tell their members to vote for a particular candidate, while campaign donations — laundered through dummy companies — can put a mob-backed candidate into office. Once an elected official is in position, he can lean on the police, influence the district attorney, and appoint officials who will be friendly to the mob's concerns. As long as there's money to grease the wheels, the apparatus can easily be induced to look the other way, turning a syndicate's operation to a simple case of business as usual.

Policemen are a little trickier, since most senior officials are assigned or promoted rather than elected. Bribery works surprisingly well, especially for infractions which the cops don't consider serious (such as gambling or the numbers racket).



Pressure from city hall can convince many senior cops to let things slide, and since the demand for illicit activity is omnipresent in most cities, the police can usually rationalize away a "stable" criminal operation as long as it's not too prominent.

Other figures, such as lawyers or newspapermen, will respond to more direct means of persuasion. Placing them on the payroll is one option, allowing the Don to plant favorable stories in the press or ensure that the D.A. goes easy on a given criminal. If that doesn't work, then threats and violence can do the job just as easily. Rarely are such figures killed, for their deaths would create an undue stink (see page 75), but often a simple beating or the threat of blackmail is enough to get them to comply.

The mob's specific activities often play a large role in how its legitimate connections respond to it. A "harmless vice," such as prostitution or gambling, can easily be overlooked, and reliable witnesses are in short supply for crimes such as extortion and racketeering. Smart syndicates try to keep their operations quiet for this reason: if they don't make much noise, it's easier for the rest of the world to ignore them. Only when things turn violent do the police become a serious concern... and of course, the National Law Enforcement Bureau in Nova Roma can always cause trouble. This is one of the reasons why some organizations are reluctant to embrace narcotics: the dangers of drugs and the public outcry over their growing use means that politicians willing to play ball with other crimes will crack down hard on drug offenders.

## RIVALS

While law enforcement can sometimes be a problem, the real trouble often comes from fellow organizations. Few syndicates have the luxury of a monopoly in the city where they operate, and most must share things with rival organizations which would love to take over their operations. When dealing with groups too big to subjugate, a syndicate must either learn to live with them, or go to war.

Most of the time, rival syndicates maintain an uneasy peace with each other. In Central City and Terminus, informal "commissions" have formed, whereby the ruling crime bosses will get together and settle any disputes they may have with each other. Central City's commission is limited to four bosses — Jack Drago, Angelo Scarelli, Eddie Silver, and Julius Grossman — and is generally stable and productive (though Drago's recent rise to power has done much to unsettle that). Terminus's seven factions are much less formal, and squabbles and conflicts break out at regular intervals. Other cities lack the organization for a true commission, and rivalries are often ironed out with a direct sit-down between the bosses involved (sometimes with an agreed-upon third party attending as an arbiter).

The existence of commissions — no matter how small or informal — is still an effective way of preventing bloodshed. Territorial disputes can be resolved, assassinations okayed, and misunderstandings smoothed over without trading gunfire in the streets. Even in cities which don't have them, a consensus among the most powerful gangs can serve to keep

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

### WISE GUYS AND MAGIC

Officially, magic is a lot like drugs to mobsters: the penalties are too stiff and the pressure it creates too dangerous to risk using. Unlike drugs, however, magic serves a very unique purpose. A couple of trained warlocks can even the odds in a gang war, or make child's play out of otherwise impossible crimes. While few Dons and underbosses practice magic — and many officially frown on those who do — an aspiring criminal warlock can often find easy work as one of their minions.

That being said, warlocks seldom become formally attached to a given syndicate, preferring to work freelance and choose their jobs accordingly. This suits the mobs as well, since it allows them to maintain a “hands-off” policy towards magic. Those warlocks who do belong to a mob expect to be left alone to conduct their research, enjoying solitude and protection at the hands of mob footmen in exchange for using their abilities in the service of a particular Don.

Like any other lackey, a warlock is expected to be discreet about his powers and conduct himself in a professional manner. Trouble from the law can't be bought off for magic the way it can for other crimes, and crystal ball squads — who rarely trouble with syndicate activity otherwise — can be dogged and tenacious foes. Warlocks who make public displays of their power, show signs of addiction, or otherwise endanger the collective are put down very swiftly before they get out of hand. An angry magic user can destroy his organization more thoroughly than any rival gang or police subpoena. Mobsters who need to kill a warlock on their payroll must use cunning and deception to get the job done. They prefer to use the trust and loyalty they have built up over the years, getting the warlock in relaxing circumstances, and then shooting him or her in the head at close range. The alternative is usually loud and messy, something most syndicates would prefer to avoid.

the peace. Troublemakers can easily find the rest of the underworld united against them, just to keep the city from exploding. A commission's powers are tenuous, however, and depend largely on the will of the Dons who sit on it. If they are in agreement, it is difficult to oppose their will. But if they are divided... things could get ugly.

The most important purpose of a commission is keeping those who wish to become Don from simply shooting their way to the top. Bosses hold their position through force of will alone, and ambitious underlings will sometimes strike against them as a way of seizing power. But if a commission doesn't okay it, then the usurper may come to power only to find all of the other syndicates in his city aligned against him. By limiting who sits on their council, commissions can stem the power of up-and-comers who didn't want to play by the rules, as well as discouraging itchy underlings from trying anything rash.

Before the war, this wasn't generally a problem, but Jack Drago's violent rise to power gave much of the Central City underground pause. They agreed among themselves to approve any new additions to their “club;” they even had Drago's support since he didn't want any other competition for his newfound position. Mobsters in other cities quickly saw the wisdom in their philosophy, and even those without a system took steps to solidify the positions of those at the top.

Despite such efforts, however, disputes cannot always be resolved peacefully. Or a given syndicate becomes too much of a threat to the others and has to be put down. Whatever the reason, what had been a tenuous coexistence can rapidly descend into all-out war. Battles are fought between footmen, pawns in the game who the higher-ups consider expendable. Hits are called out on known capos and underbosses if possible, while the leadership of each mob often holes up in a secure location. Wars are usually over very quickly. One side gets the upper hand and the remainder of the criminal underworld — smelling blood in the water — helps to finish the job. Those that don't end have a tendency to go on and on, inflicting scores of casualties and turning the streets into a shooting gallery. When they finally end, it comes more from exhaustion than victory, and the survivors are left severely weakened for young up-and-comers to gobble up. There has not been a war of any great magnitude in any city since before the war, though Central City and Terminus both have the right elements to start one.

The same formula generally applies to internal disputes within a single syndicate. The Don has the ability to make peace between his warring soldiers, but every settlement leaves someone feeling dismissed. So much of a mobster's life revolves around taking what he wants without thinking, that bumping off one of his own is rarely a big deal. A Don who can't control such squabbles is bound to lose his position, as rivals and enemies take advantage of the schism in order to destroy his organization.

It is for these reasons that the need for commissions is respected, and why rival Dons go out of their way to resolve disputes before they get out of hand. Business is all that matters, and lengthy bloodshed is bad for business. If a war is deemed necessary, it comes fast and hard... and one way or another, everyone hopes that it ends quickly.

### TONGS AND TRIADS

Most organized mobs in the Unified Commonwealth follow the same basic patterns as the American Mafia, as discussed earlier in this chapter. But members of the nation's Tongs — Asian gangs originating in the Golden Empire and centered primarily in the city of Gateway — have a very different organization and *modus operandi*. More than any other U.C. criminals, the Tongs have a close affiliation with their immigrant roots, maintaining traditions which they claim are over a thousand years old.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD



According to legend, the Tongs are an offshoot of the Triads, a series of secret societies which existed in the Empire of the Golden Sun many hundreds of years ago. They were collectively known as the Tiandihui, or Heaven and Earth Society. They met in lodges and participated in many esoteric traditions and rituals. The reigning Emperor declared such societies illegal — claiming that they harbored political enemies of his — and ordered their members smoked out and executed to a man. This forced many clubs and lodges underground, where they worked to undermine the Emperor's rule. They often served as a law unto themselves in outlying provinces, and stories of Robin Hood-like generosity can be found in the earliest tales from the Golden Empire. Their members trained in the martial arts, swore oaths of fealty to their masters, and established their own codes of honor distinct from the surrounding culture. As time went on and they evolved through the centuries, they gradually turned to more traditional forms of crime, such as extortion and drug smuggling.

The Triads accompanied their fellow immigrants to the Unified Commonwealth, where they took root in neighborhoods dominated by Golden natives. Here, they were known as Tongs, a word which translates to “lodge house” or “meeting place.” Tongs were usually much smaller than the Triads (a Triad is technically composed of many Tongs), but fit well with the smaller numbers of immigrants in the U.C. Golden immigrants were often cut off from Commonwealth society in ways that other immigrants weren't. They lacked a common culture,

their language was alien and difficult to learn, and while prejudice against them decreased greatly in the years preceding the war, they rarely turned to those outside their group when they had problems or difficulties. The Tongs were more than happy to provide protective services, remind them of their common heritage, and sell them opium and games of chance whenever they could. Distracted by other problems and struggling to make permanent connections to the Golden community, the U.C. police had no idea how far Tong influence extended.

## ORGANIZATION AND TRADITIONS

Tongs are organized much the same way their ancestors were in the old country, complete with rituals, passwords, and formal hierarchy. True to their origins, they posit themselves against traditional authorities, who as the spiritual descendants of the Emperor represent an affront to both them and their ancestors. This serves as a convenient excuse to engage in all forms of criminal behavior, from loan sharking to gambling and prostitution.

Most Tongs are organized along the strict lines set forth by their ancient progenitor. Each Tong is led by a *da ge* or “big brother” who may have several other “big brothers” beneath him. They control an elaborate system of thieves, pimps, racketeers, and enforcers, all of whom are formal members of the Tong. The structure is largely horizontal — with different,

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

### TONG RANKS

Tongs in the U.C. place a strong emphasis on rank and station, with titles delineating certain specific duties within the organization. Though most ranks are more or less equal to each other, the clear delineation between them is very important to the Tong's members. A brief list of the most important follows.

**San Chu:** The center of the organization, usually synonymous with the group's *da ge*.

**Hueng Chu:** The ceremonial officer, who leads initiation rituals and other such activities. Usually reserved for a senior member.

**Sing Fung:** Essentially a recruiting officer, charged with selecting new members. Usually reserved for a senior member.

**Red Poles:** A series of junior positions, encompassing any number of duties. Possible permutations include assassins, extortionists, drug runners, and the heads of gambling interests.

**White Fans:** General administrators, overseeing various elements of the Tong's operation.

**Straw Sandals:** Liaisons with the legitimate business community and rival Tongs.

semi-equal members each embracing different duties — rather than vertical. They often refer to each other as “businessmen,” emphasizing — like their syndicate cousins — the legitimacy and propriety of their behavior. They all maintain a strong loyalty to each other, and are obligated to help each other out in times of crises. Little brothers all pay homage to their *da ge* and obey his edicts without question; he has the power to settle all disputes with but a wave of his hand.

Initiations take place in a lodge house, representing the mythical forests and cities where their forefathers hid from the Emperor. A ritual dance marks the arrival of the initiate, who enters from the east, towards the rising sun, and passes through a ceremonial “gateway” of drawn swords. After passing through three more “entrances” (guarded by Tong members and requiring a ritual handshake or password to proceed), the initiate arrives at a ceremonial altar. There he stands within a ring of bamboo and recites 36 oaths of fealty, promising eternal loyalty to the Tong and vowing to never betray its members or its purpose. He also promises to aid and protect the families of his fellow initiates, and to keep secret all of the rites and rituals which he has learned. With the recitation of each oath, a piece of paper is burned, containing the words of the oath upon it. In the climax to the ceremony, the gathered assembly recites the history of the Triads and a sacrificial rooster is beheaded. The initiate then pricks his finger and dips it into a bowl containing spiced wine, the blood of the rooster, and the ashes of the burned paper strips. He then licks his finger, symbolizing his newborn commitment to the Tong.

Three days later, a second ceremony takes place, wherein the initiate washes his face and dons new robes symbolizing his rebirth as a member of the order. He is now a full member of the Tong with all of the rights and privileges which accompany initiation.

With membership comes a variety of benefits. A Tong member can expect support from his brothers whenever he has need of them, and enjoys the respect (fear) of the local populace. He may make use of the Tong's headquarters as he sees fit and is left alone to conduct his own affairs without undue interference from above. In return, he must tithe a certain percentage of his profits back to the Tong and be ready to assist his brothers should they need his assistance. Other obligations are usually spelled out within a Tong's initiation ceremony (see the sidebar on the next page for more).

Tongs are usually based around a single headquarters or meeting house, often well known to the local populace and publicly declared in Cantonese signs above the door. Many of them are ostensibly “support” associations for the local Golden community, serving the same purpose as Freemasons or Shriners. In truth, however, they act as a meeting place where Tong members can hash out their differences, or to conduct the secretive ceremonies which define their organization.

Most Tongs place a strong emphasis on the martial arts, and practice constantly in various forms of unarmed fighting. Gunplay between rival Tongs is rare; while a Tong member would happily gun down a recalcitrant storeowner, he would never dream of turning the weapon on a rival Tong member. It dishonors the common roots they all share. Instead, swords, knives, and martial arts weapons are the norm in Tong conflicts — their lethality no less complete, but somehow more “honorable” in their way of thinking. Tong headquarters often contain an impressive arsenal of martial arts weapons, as well as plenty of firearms for more pedestrian uses. Hatchets, the traditional weapon of the Tongs, are often in plentiful supply as well.

Punishment within a Tong's ranks is quite harsh, on par with anything practiced by any other criminal organization. If a death sentence is decreed, the victim is subjected to the “death of a thousand cuts,” whereby every muscle in his body is sliced through with a sharp knife. Less harsh penalties include ritual beatings, formal acts of atonement, and canings with a bamboo rod.

For all of their adherence to tradition, however, no Tongs have any direct ties to the Empire of the Golden Sun. A few smuggle opium in through their contacts on steamer ships, but most can bring in supplies through the Borderlands at a substantially reduced cost. Most members are firmly tied to the U.C., with relatives and family members on this side of





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## TONG RULES

Codes of behavior vary from Tong to Tong, but most use some variation of the following rules. These are recited as part of the oaths of initiation and given a high premium in the Tongs' rhetoric, but — like the rules governing other criminal organizations — are often ignored or rationalized away when the situation suits them.

1) Establish strong social connections with the people around you. Enemies are plentiful, and it will not do to make more than necessary.

2) Do not make decisions without first consulting your superiors. Your actions affect the entire membership, and you do not have the right to endanger your brothers without reason.

3) Everyone has his or her assigned tasks to perform. Do your duty without question and do not worry whether your brother is doing his.

4) Do not speak of our business to outsiders, for our safety and yours. Wives, lovers, and family members must not be endangered by learning of our affairs.

5) Be mindful of how you are perceived. Do not frighten or threaten those who can provide you with support — particularly the wealthy. Act to assuage their concerns and alleviate any fears they may have about you.

6) Unity is strength. Stand firm with your brothers and do not turn away from them. Always obey your superiors and hear the wisdom of their words.

7) Gambling and opium are the source of our strength. Handle them with appropriate care.

8) Money earned outside of the order's activities is to be shared with the entire order. Turn it over to your superior and trust him to disperse it amongst your brothers.

9) If you are arrested, keep silent, and remember your vows. Take all blame upon yourself, without implicating your brothers.

the Columbic. Every now and then, someone will take the trip across the ocean to visit the motherland, hoping to uncover the founders of their order. To date, none of them has yet returned, either because they have remained in the Golden Empire... or because the secrets they sought carried too high a price.

Gateway is the uncontested capital of Tong activity, with at least a dozen identifiable groups based in the Golden neighborhood of Eastowne. Paradiso and New Eden have also seen Tong-based crimes within their respective Golden communities, though nowhere near the numbers of Gateway. Three Tongs are known to operate in Paradiso — centered around the flesh parlors of the North Side — while another four have been identified in various neighborhoods of New Eden. Central City, Terminus, and other large cities have no appreciable Tong presence, though a few minor gangs can be found in the service of larger crime lords.

## CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

Tongs participate in many of the same kinds of activities that other organized criminals do. They front gambling operations under the auspices of mah-jongg parlors, prostitution rings fed by illegal immigrant girls, and opium dens which remain a staple of their criminal endeavors. Ironically, while they cheerfully supply all the opium a man can smoke, they uniformly refuse to deal in other narcotics, considering them beneath their attentions (as well as garnering too much police interest).

Opium dens are often ramshackle affairs, consisting of a wide area partitioned off by screens or beaded curtains. Beds or lounging couches cushion the customers, who smoke the opium in pipes or special inhalers. The Tongs prefer opium not only because the poppy originally hails from the Golden Empire, but also because its users become docile and muzzled under its influence... which means that large numbers can be catered to without difficulty. Most opium dens contain several bodyguards to keep an eye out for trouble, as well as a number of "assistants" who provide the customers with their drug and see to their needs during the stay. Tong members supply them with opium and collect a hefty percentage of the take.

Prostitution rings run in a similar fashion, though the high-end ones have private rooms for their clients. Gambling is also a huge business within the U.C.'s Golden communities — it is estimated that nearly 300 Tong-run gambling parlors can be found in Gateway's Eastowne alone. Mah-jongg is the game of choice for the vast bulk of these establishments. It came over from the Empire of the Golden Sun along with the first immigrants, and its ubiquitous marked tiles can be found anywhere in a given community. Mah-jongg parlors host hundreds of players at a time, often playing for outrageously high stakes. Some Tongs have expanded their gambling interests to include card games and western-style lotteries, but mah-jongg retains its ironclad hold on the local community.

Extortion and protection rackets are a staple of Tong activity, though they often pay somewhat more respect to the responsibilities the endeavor implies than western mobs do. Many Tongs will keep their neighborhoods safe from petty crime, punishing wrongdoers who venture into their territory. They usually do this simply to defend their turf, but the local citizens — reluctant to speak to the police because of the language and cultural barriers — often have nowhere else to turn. The Tongs take advantage of this by extorting huge sums from their territory, justifying it as "training fees" and the need to maintain their lodge headquarters. The money can be collected quite subtly, sometimes in plain sight of outsiders. Many Tongs participate in New Year's celebrations as a means of collecting their yearly fee. Dressed as a winding Chinese dragon, they cavort through the streets, passing shops and storefronts which "feed" the beast by putting "lettuce" (money) into its maw. Other shakedowns can easily be disguised as simple transactions, all but invisible to westerners' eyes.

In addition to drug smuggling, illegal immigration remains the Tongs' sole link to the distant Golden Empire. They bring their fellow countrymen in by the boatload, charging exorbi-

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

tant rates for the service and packing immigrants together in poorly ventilated ships' holds. Many die crossing the Columbic and those who survive are pressed into service in one of the Tong's brothels or mah-jongg parlors. Sweatshops churning out cheap clothing can be found everywhere in Golden communities, most operated by cheap slave labor brought over from the Empire. Tongs who traffic in human slavery maintain nebulous connections with their partners across the ocean. Many have never met those who acquire eager immigrants, communicating only through written letters and sailors who act as go-betweens. All that matters to them is getting their "cargo" on time

In the last few years, the most forward-thinking Tongs have explored financial rackets as well, hoping to exploit second- or third-generation Goldeners who have left their working class roots behind. Pyramid schemes, shady land deals, and elaborate stock swindles mark the Tongs' *modus operandi* in these endeavors, hoping to fleece would-be entrepreneurs of all their hard-earned savings. Victims who try to get their money back quickly learn how far they have fallen from their native tree as the Golden neighborhoods once so familiar to them become a maze of frightened faces and dead ends. The Tongs know their business well, and though they may be expanding into new enterprises, they still maintain their power bases deep within the secretive walls of Eastowne and its ilk.

### ENEMIES AND RIVALS

The Tongs have their share of enemies, just like any criminal organization. With the exception of Gateway, they have not yet expanded enough to conflict with the larger syndicates, but as their influence expands, it's only a matter of time before they bump heads with the older guard. Their fellow Tongs, too, can cause serious problems, as limited resources within the Golden community lead to fierce clashes over territory. Against these dangers, the Tongs have responded much the same way as the syndicates do: with a liberal mixture of accommodation and force.

The relatively small size of each Tong means that squabbling between them is quite common. Fights break out over turf and bragging rights all the time, and energy which could easily be spent expanding their operations is wasted in useless battles. In Gateway, where the number of Tongs is highest, a council of Dynasties has been formed — consisting of the *da ge* from each Tong and a few neutral arbiters. They meet irregularly to discuss matters of mutual interest, smooth over

differences, and authorize assassinations of troublesome interlopers. Their collective power has been enough to check the growth of other criminal interests (most notably the Patterson brothers, Gateway's other dominant criminal syndicate), but internal dissent is often quite fierce. They rarely have the collective will to do more than talk, and the hatred some members display towards each other makes it unlikely that they will ever be more than a loose coalition.

Other cities need not adopt such elaborate measures; a sit down between rival *da ge* is easy to obtain, and the Tongs lack the power to make a collective stand against outside forces. Some of them (particularly in Central City) are actively beholden to large syndicates, paying them tribute just as any other minor gang would. (Despite that, they are fiercely protective of their home turf, and even made men must step carefully when entering a Tong-controlled neighborhood.) Minor disputes can be solved simply by talking, or by obeying the edicts of their syndicate masters.

As with the syndicates, however, talking isn't always enough. Tempers, territory, and ancient feuds carried over from the Empire periodically explode into savage violence. "Tong wars," as they are called, are often sparked in an instant and can leave dozens dead or wounded before they're through. Smaller duels take place far more frequently, as individuals challenge each other over slights both real and imagined. The outcomes of such duels are supposed to end the matter, but of course, every loser has a group of fellow Tong members eager to avenge his death. Lengthy wars often wipe out the losing Tong, leaving but a tiny handful of survivors who must flee for their lives or pledge loyalty to a new lodge. The police struggle with the results of such savagery, cleaning mangled bodies off the streets and searching vainly for the perpetrators who seem to vanish like smoke. Sadly, innocents often suffer during Tong wars as well, for the participants have no qualms about cutting down any bystanders who get in their way.

When dealing with outside opponents, the Tongs rely on the safety of their neighborhoods. They specialize in ambush attacks, firing gunshots from passing cars, or taking a hatchet to an opponent while mounted on a motorcycle like some modern-day Genghis Khan. The intimidation factor of such incidents is quite high, and many Tongs can extend their influence simply by spreading stories of similar horrors. Unfortunately, once they leave the Golden community, their advantage quickly vanishes. Their dress and mannerisms make them stand out like sore thumbs, and other criminal organizations usually outnumber them by a substantial margin. This state of affairs — total dominance within a rigidly limited area — has helped check the Tongs' growth in the U.C. thus far.

Thankfully (for the Tongs at least), the law is far less of a problem for them than it is for other syndicates. Police often have little idea of what happens in Tong-controlled neighborhoods, unable to pierce the cloak of Golden culture and language. The Tongs' victims rarely go to the police — indeed, few even realize that the police are an option — and precious few policemen have the cultural knowledge to investigate more than the most open-and-shut cases (Gateway has begun actively recruiting cadets with Golden backgrounds for the express purpose of alleviating this condition.) This means that



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Tongs rarely have to bother with bribing or paying off the police, and while members run the risk of arrest as every criminal does, they do not yet have the need to formally address "the law enforcement problem."

The same holds true for most other Tong activities. Like gaunt criminals, they draw strength from the insular nature of their native communities. It allows them to thwart their enemies while providing a natural cover for their operations — one even more impenetrable than the gaunts in many ways. But by the same token, it also allows other groups to keep them boxed in, to limit their range, and to contain their growth. If the Tongs ever learn how to expand operations outside of the Golden community, they will become a force to be feared. But their incessant squabbling (coupled with a strong but rigid support base) means that there will always be someone bigger to fight... and therefore, they will always have enemies.

## ROLE-PLAYING MOBSTERS

As we have seen, characters within the ranks of organized crime govern themselves by distinct rules and codes, living in a society all their own where conventional laws do not apply. The life of a mobster can facilitate a variety of character types, the ins and outs of which are discussed in this section.

### MOBSTER TYPES

The mobster is a stereotype in and of itself — everyone knows the image of the pin-striped goomba, nervously fingering a violin case and staring out with shifty eyes from under his snap-brimmed fedora. Within the ranks of organized crime, however, multiple subgroups can be found, all of which have their own unique outlook and can be used as the basis of a more developed mobster character. Brief outlines for some of the more prominent types are discussed below. They should provide a general idea of the wide assortment of organized criminals available to play. (*See also the section on gaunt mobsters, beginning on page 151.*)

#### The Company Man

The company man has risen steadily through the ranks, devoting himself to the organization and always acting in its best interests. He displays intelligence and initiative, yet has never become so successful as to threaten their higher-ups. Most company men serve in middle management positions, controlling the streets as capos or advising the Don as consiglieres. For them, the syndicate comes first, before any individual members. Their willingness to look at the big picture means that they can readily sacrifice underlings if the situation calls for it, and their quiet tactical knowledge allows them to act without undue emotion clouding their judgment. In many ways, they are ideal for the mobster's life.

Company men, however, rarely become Dons or supreme leaders. The titular head of an organization demands a certain ego — a willingness to seize personal glory which may or may not be in the syndicate's best interest. A company man would rather find quiet satisfaction in his job... or better yet, govern from behind the scenes while letting those above him serve as walking targets.

They almost never go off half-cocked, and they know better than to directly implement any violence. Someone beneath them always handles beatings and murders, and they never order such assaults without understanding the bigger picture. Very few of them can be found in the ranks of foot soldiers; even in the lowest ranks, they get others to do their dirty work. They are often experts at implied menace, threatening violence without actually doing anything. They use this mostly to keep their underlings in line, ensuring that no one beneath them takes their largess for granted. They are also adept financial planners, able to keep track of large sums of money and funnel them to various other branches of the organization. Company men form the underlying structure of any successful mob; without them, their organization would be unable to function.

#### The Driver

Every mob needs a wheelman to provide a quick getaway and to ferry the bosses from place to place. The driver was likely obsessed with cars at an early age: racing tooled-up jalopies and tinkering around with old engines to see what they could do. His addiction to excitement steered him away from becoming a mechanic, and troubles with the law likely drew the attention of his current employers. They allowed him to indulge his passion at whim; in exchange, he had to dedicate himself to them unconditionally.

Drivers work behind the wheel when a mob is conducting a hit; they keep the motor running and provide a quick exit after the triggerman has done his work. They also work high profile robberies and similar crimes, making sure none of the perpetrators is left behind to answer any uncomfortable questions. On a more mundane level, they serve as chauffeurs for the inner circle, driving the Don to important meetings or just to the bakery for some pastries. They keep the autos running when necessary, and can fashion and plant car bombs when the situation calls for it. Hijackings and truck robberies often involve drivers, who can hot-wire the vehicle if the keys are unavailable, and who know how to dispose of it once the job is done. Many drivers can serve in other capacities as well, and are more than willing to handle a weapon if things get really rough.

Drivers specialize in Smoothness and Moxie abilities, placing special emphasis on speed and hand-eye coordination. In addition to the expected driving skills, many of them possess rudimentary engineering skills as well, and have a good working knowledge of local roadways. Their loyalty to the organization stems both from the thrill of exercising their abilities so wantonly, and fear of what would happen if they tried to run. Like rhinos, they rarely rise very high in the organization, contenting themselves with the step-and-fetch life of a foot soldier.

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

### The Front Man

Whenever the syndicate needs to interact with the legitimate world, they use a front man. Whether it be a lawyer fighting to spring members from prison, an accountant washing all the dirty money through legal companies, or a journalist spinning puff pieces about the Don's charity work and community service, the front man ensures that the mob's real business is distorted and obfuscated to the point of invisibility. Some front men started their careers with legitimate goals, only to be seduced by the money they could make defending the organization. Others, however, sought out life in the syndicate deliberately, either through some familial connection or out of a desire to be a part of the gangster's life. Either way, their efforts make sure that the public never looks too closely at what their employers are doing.

The front man works entirely to construct a façade for the organization — a false mask which keeps the scrutiny of law enforcement, reform-minded politicians, and the public to a minimum. Such façades take on a number of different aspects. *Public image* concerns that which the average citizen reads or hears, including newspaper articles, public trials, and philanthropic activities within the community. By shifting the public's perception, the front man can minimize or eliminate fallout from the organization's criminal behavior. *Finances* include money laundering operations, accounting ledgers altered to hide illegal funds, and other means by which illicitly gained income can be passed as legal and legitimate. *Political cover* involves efforts to control the laws themselves, such as rewriting prostitution codes to make brothels legal, or downplaying gambling operations as a "harmless vice" unworthy of the police department's time.

Whatever the façade requires, however, it falls to the front man to see it implemented. Most have no other duties — their role requires them to retain the trappings of their chosen profession, keeping them from getting their hands too dirty. While they may cook the books or spin an outrageous story for the papers, you'll never see them handling stolen goods or threatening recalcitrant high rollers. Despite that, however, some of them — particularly accountants — have intimate details of the syndicate's operations, and may know more about the mob's illegal activities than the Don or his lieutenant. In such situations, the front man becomes very vulnerable: a ripe target for either investigating police officers or rival syndicates looking to wreak havoc.

### The Heir Apparent

The Don's son... the little prince... whatever you call him, this type of mobster has the organization in his blood. He grew up in the shadow of an influential relative — a father or an uncle belonging to the mob's inner circle. His every whim was catered to; teachers and adults lived in fear of his mood swings, lest a failing grade or a scolding lecture result in a gunshot to the back of the head. As time went on, he slowly integrated with the rest of the mob, snubbing the legitimate life for a world of violence and privilege. For the heir apparent, the mob is the only acceptable form of life. The gangster's

code has replaced all other forms of morality; law and order are fairy tales for cowards and weaklings. As long as *omertà* is fulfilled and the dictates of his individual family are met, the heir apparent feels entitled to take what he wishes.

This type of mobster never experiences the gritty lower ranks of the syndicate — save perhaps for a few "initiation rituals" designed to toughen him up. He can usually be found among the underbosses, closer to his father or uncle. This elite placement, without the benefit of clawing one's way up through experience, tends to be a double-edged sword. Some heirs find leadership a natural fit. Trained by their older relatives and adapting quite well to life in the mob, they quickly establish themselves as a force to be reckoned with. Some even provide an immediate threat to the very father or uncle who brought them into the mob in the first place. They're often given control of considerable assets, and have scores of men working beneath them.

Others, however, stray much further from the tree. Spoiled by entitlement and thinking nothing of the consequences of their actions, they often act with destructive rashness. Many of them make unnecessary enemies with their insults, often alienating those beneath them as readily as those outside the organization. Only their elder's benevolence keeps them from suffering the wrath of some capo or underboss. Such *enfants terribles* rarely last long; their fathers pull them from active participation, their peers kill them once the elder is in the ground, or in the most spectacular cases, their incompetence takes the entire organization down in flames.

### The Moneyman

Money men are the backbone of any well-run mob. They each control a given enterprise such as a brothel, an underground casino, or an illegitimate business, funneling the profits back into the organization. Some of them coordinate more "freelance" operations, planning hijackings or protection shake-downs to supplement the mob's coffers. While they can handle themselves in a crisis, most of them have plenty of underlings around to do most of the dirty work. They prefer to work behind the scenes, running their operation as smoothly as possible and keeping the higher-ups from interfering too much.

Generally speaking, a moneyman runs just a single operation: one store, one underground business, or one group of mobsters who rob, extort, or conduct other activities on his orders. He knows his field like the back of his hand; the employees all answer to him, the bankroll is his responsibility, and if there's ever any trouble, he's the one who takes care of it. The more successful ones run several operations, though such advancement usually puts them out of direct contact with their duties. Most of them are capos, controlling a handful of men who help them run things, and paying dues to the Don and underboss above them.

Besides the illegal nature of their endeavor, there is little to differentiate a moneyman from any other sort of businessman; just a willingness to break the law and a penchant for violence if things get ugly. They must be reasonably intelligent (high Brains) and have a knack for details. A good Moxie score



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

is preferable too, since they usually have to deal with paying customers or command the men beneath them with reasonable authority. Many have a fair knowledge of gunplay, though they lack the physical skills to compete with rhinos and other muscle men. Those who do their jobs well are usually left alone by the organization, free to run their affairs as they see fit. They need only send a given percentage of their take up to their superiors, and make sure that business stays good. Those who can't produce the goods quickly lose their protected status, or worse: find themselves on the wrong end of a hit man's gun.

## The Outsider

Of all the stereotypes discussed here, the outsider is the one most likely to cause headaches for the mob in question. He's the small-time operator who pays protection money to keep his doors open, or the hit man who works freelance instead of exclusively for one particular mob. Outsiders are not

a viable part of the organization, and yet their activities are invariably connected to it. They deal with the mob on a regular basis, often performing services at its behest. But they are separate from the normal hierarchy; they don't follow orders in the same way and their activities are considered outside the sphere of standard syndicate activities.

Most of the time, outsiders are "breadwinners" — freelance criminals paying a portion of their profits to the mob. In exchange, they are entitled to protection and can complain to the local capo when problems arise (though the capo, of course, is under no obligation to do anything about it). Their ranks include independent criminals, underground businesses, and legally operated companies under the local syndicate's thumb. Other outsiders usually consist of those with specialized talents, who can afford to remain independent or who the organization has no use for except in certain circumstances. They include safecrackers, airplane pilots, undertakers willing to dispose of unwanted corpses, and the ubiquitous assassin for hire.

The trouble with outsiders (from the mob's perspective, at least) is that they have no check on their behavior beyond brute force. If they're captured by the police or wish to aid the syndicate's enemies, options for dealing with them are extremely limited. If the mob has them killed, then their services are no longer available or the income they generate is lost. While many of them can be scared if they fall out of line, their position makes them loose threads, unable to be tidily dealt with if they cause any problems. Because of this, most syndicates limit what outsiders see and know — keeping them in the dark as much as possible — or else have deliberate plans in place to eliminate them if they cause trouble.

## **Types of Outsiders**

Below are three specific types of outsiders which bear further description.

*The Armorer.* Armorers provide firearms and other hardware to mobsters. Sometimes they are legitimate gun dealers, but most of the time, they are thieves or black marketeers, peddling wares stolen from more upstanding sources. With the end of the war, military surpluses led to a lot of warehouses full of guns and ammunition. Armorers often have a line on such stockpiles, and can provide handguns, submachine guns, and even explosives at a discount rate. Some also provide "specialized" services, such as ensuring that the weapons are untraceable, or disposing of them after the commission of a crime. A few serve as gunsmiths as well, cleaning or repairing weapons which the organization wishes to use again.

In certain cases, an organization's armorer is a foot soldier or a capo — a regular member of the crew assigned to secure weaponry (usually by hijacking a shipment.) Most of the time, however, they're outside sources — freelancers who sell guns for a living and are only too happy to provide a discount to regular buyers. A few are even career military officers who can make supplies disappear without raising a fuss. Whatever the case, their main concern is keeping the guns "clean," and ensuring that the police cannot trace their activities.

## **SIDEBAR: DOUBLE LIVES**

A mobster's family is often left out of the gritty details of their provider's life. While promising sons or nephews may be brought into their elder's business, wives, daughters, and even male children disinclined to criminal behavior are kept at home, forbidden from participating in the syndicate's dirty business. In such situations, the mobster himself often leads a double life. He tells his spouse and loved ones that he works a legitimate job — as a union organizer, for example, or an executive in a trucking firm. It allows the family to sleep easier while shielding them from knowledge that might otherwise get them killed. *Omertà* implies that the mobster is actually protecting them by lying in such a manner, making it an obligation to practice active deceit.

Some mobsters go to great lengths to maintain such facades, to the point of setting up offices at the business they purport to run, and printing business cards with their phony occupation listed on them. This dovetails quite nicely into the false front they must often provide to keep the authorities at bay; their families become just one more group of civilians to be kept in the dark.

In most cases, the family suspects that *something* is afoot, though they rarely parse the full depths of their provider's lifestyle. After all, it's easy enough for a longshoreman to take a few kickbacks or a cabstand manager to have his fingers in some dirty pies. That doesn't make him a gangster. So why should our father/husband/uncle/older brother be any different? This willful self-deception can be used to inadvertently assist the gangster should the situation call for it. Family members have been known to pick up their gangland relatives at murder scenes or help them dispose of incriminating evidence, all under the auspices of some explanation that fits in with the mobster's "cover."

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

*The Doctor.* Anyone who knows how to patch up bullet holes is worth their weight in gold to an enterprising gangster. Unfortunately, hospitals and private doctors are required by law to report gunshot injuries and other wounds, making it hard for a mobster to receive proper care when his line of work turns violent. A mob doctor is always willing to look the other way when a particular patient enters his office.

Because doctors are well paid as a general rule, it's difficult to bring them into the ranks of organized crime. Those who do have usually lost their license for some reason, and see mob work as the only way to practice medicine. A few are greedy and corrupt, and enjoy peddling their influence to the darker elements of society. These sorts will often do more than just stitch up injuries — stealing prescription drugs from the local hospital, for example, or hiding bodies amid the John Does in the morgue.

Sometimes an upstanding doctor can be intimidated into aiding a mobster, but such bargains are dangerous. The physician is likely to turn his patient over to the police — or at least inform on him — which leads smart gangsters to cultivate friendly medical help, rather than browbeat an unknown.

*The Informant.* Informants serve in a variety of roles, from street pigeons monitoring the local craps game to high-ranking members of the police department. They get paid to fill the

mob in on any activities that go on within their sphere. Sometimes, they must do more than that — destroy a key piece of paperwork, say, or arrange for certain evidence to disappear. Many of them serve in clerical or secretarial positions, which gives them access to a great deal of information. Others hold positions which allow them to keep tabs on those around them: the precinct's watch sergeant, for example, or the D.A.'s chauffeur. The mob pays them to deliver reliable tips, and to inform them of any notable events which may interfere with the smooth operation of their business. Each crew has its own routine, but most informants rely on anonymous phone calls or clandestine meetings with a reliable foot soldier. Informants can make easy money with their tips, and most consider such "extracurricular activities" supremely harmless. Few would call themselves criminals; they're simply working stiff trying to make a little extra dough. Journalists often employ similar methods to gain information, and they don't pay nearly as much as the mob does...

### The Rhino

The rhino grew up as the schoolyard bully, beating up other kids for their lunch money and tormenting those who defied him. He was often large for his age and used his size and strength to his advantage. When he grew older, he discovered knives and guns as a way to augment his physical skills. He

## STRUCTURE AND RULES

Unlike private detectives or independent criminals, mobsters belong to an established system with a definable (and fairly inflexible) structure to follow. This may take some getting used to, especially if the players are accustomed to doing what they please when they please. While the mob allows for a certain amount of freedom in its membership (especially if it makes them money), crossing the line can have lethal consequences.

Two specific rules come into play with headstrong PCs. The first is loyalty to your superior, which even the loosest syndicates consider sacrosanct. Dons and underbosses cannot govern if their underlings don't do as they say, and a word from the higher-ups is tantamount to law. If it means making a risky hit, the characters must do it. If it means robbing someone whom they have befriended, the characters must do it. Loyalty to the organization comes before friendship, before country, and before God. Those who disobey their Don are rarely long for this world. Disloyalty therefore needs to be carefully concealed, or arranged such that those in the position to punish the characters are unable to act. (This usually means killing their superior and taking his position, which is covered in further detail on page 89.)

Of course, if the characters are already in a position of power and authority, the reverse is true. They expect their underlings to follow orders and do what they're told, and grow increasingly paranoid if their wishes aren't carried out. Could they be losing control of their organization? Are their underlings plotting a coup? Questions spring up every time a minion is slow to obey an edict, and can only be assuaged by the knowledge that the chain of command is still intact. *Omertá* can be used to maintain a grip on power, and death is the only punishment which makes a lasting impression.

The second rule which PCs might find themselves troubled by is the need to earn money for the organization. Capos and Dons expect a percentage of everything the characters make, and business is expected to keep rolling regardless of any ups and downs. Professional criminals rarely turn over a cut of their take willingly... but in a mob, those who hold out are asking for trouble. Capos and underbosses can be as harsh on underlings who hold out on them as they are on those outside the organization, and too much skimming can be construed as disloyalty. Characters who complain too much about giving up a share of the cut may be reminded of all the benefits they gain by belonging to a crew... or they can simply be beaten as a warning to stay in line. Such conflicts rarely sit well with the players, who may use it as fodder for a later revenge scheme.

GMs can use these rules (as well as those detailed starting on page 74) as strong incentive for a mobster campaign. Adhering to them in uncomfortable circumstances can bring a sense of danger and intrigue to a scenario, while breaking them can turn an entire campaign on its ear, forcing the characters to either repeatedly cover up their activities or find a way to survive the consequences.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

loved the power that it gave him: the rush and the thrill of inflicting pain on other people. The organization provided a natural outlet for his aggressiveness while protecting him from the legal consequences of the harm he inflicted.

Rhinos usually act as the raw foot soldiers of the syndicate. They learn how to intimidate people with their presence, causing outsiders to break out in a cold sweat as a result of their very presence. If heavy breathing and a menacing stare doesn't work, they're more than happy to wade in with their fists; a few swollen eyes or broken digits will do wonders for a man's attitude. When the time comes to really take off the

gloves, they can handle a revolver or submachine gun as well as any trained soldier. They make excellent bodyguards and the Don usually has four or five around his person at all times. They can be found by the dozens in any criminal organization; when one falls, another one always steps in to take his place.

Obviously, physical stats are very important for rhinos (though it's possible to find some who get by on bluster and attitude rather than size and strength), as is knowledge of weapons and the ability to inflict harm both publicly and quietly. Rhinos tend to be fairly loyal to the organization which they serve, though more out of necessity than inclination. They can't go

to the police to help them with their troubles and even with their lethal abilities, the streets would make short work of them should word ever leak that they have been cut loose. Though some may be intelligent, they rarely rise too high in the ranks. Their proclivity for violence tends to cut their lives short, and they rarely demonstrate the strategic thinking required for genuine leadership.

## The Leader

The Dons and their inner circle can start out as any one of the above types. Their evolution comes about through a combination of tenacity, wiles, and sheer brute will. Whether born into the upper echelons or fighting their way up with their own two hands, they have the necessary combination of personal magnetism, ego, and foresight to seize the mantle of power. Their word is obeyed unquestioningly and the only way to remove them from their position is to kill them.

Most leaders retain some aspects of their original stereotype; a rhino, for example, may be quick to resort to violence, while an heir apparent will act with a sense of entitlement and *noblesse oblige*. All of them, however, are smart enough to move carefully, and ruthless enough to quash perceived threats to their power. They also universally pride themselves on their Machiavellian thinking. In their minds, they're men of the world, seeing life as it truly is rather than what society would like it to be. They're no different than bankers or politicians — powerful men who control the shape of society. The leader is simply honest enough to do away with empty pretensions of morality.



## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

Life in the organization can be dangerous; rivals are always ready to take control, and betrayal — though strictly forbidden by *omertá* — is far more common than anyone likes to think. Because of this, many mob leaders insist on consolidating power into their own hands... a practice which only increases their status as targets. Most leaders rarely travel far, remaining in their home or selected headquarters, and surrounded by bodyguards for security. They issue orders to underlings rather than doing anything themselves, though they retain the iron will to ensure that their commands are obeyed. In so doing, they hope to stave off any attempts on their life. They become nebulous, almost legendary figures to those below them. A personal visit from one's Don is a sign of great honor, usually reserved for only the most loyal and efficient of underlings.

### MOBSTERS IN MIXED PARTIES

As open criminals, mobsters are among the most difficult characters to set into a mixed party. How can they consistently get along with a Bureau Agent, for example, or a detective with no tolerance for "scum?" Of course, a little friction can make for some excellent role-playing, but in many cases, the problem might appear too large to solve with friendly in-character bickering. A good helping of foresight and a willingness to be flexible may be in order.

The PCs' built-in status as a member of the Few can help a great deal. Even a hardened killer may be willing to work with a group if he senses something truly wrong with the world. The Few are often lonely in their quest and place a high value on those who share their beliefs. This can be doubly true in the case of a mobster, whose world is already full of deceit and betrayal. A small group of straight-arrow companions would be a great comfort to him — especially if they suspect the same things about the world that he does.

Beyond that, there are several more innocuous ways to smooth out the differences between a mobster character and his fellow party members. *The Edge of Midnight's* perpetual moral grays mean that superficially honest characters come into contact with the underworld more often. A policeman character, for example, might take pay-offs to routinely ignore a gambling den run by the mobster PC. It's a harmless vice, he reasons, and leaving it be frees him up to focus on more pressing crimes. Similarly, a Bureau Agent investigating corruption in City Hall may need an underworld contact to inform him of the mayor's backroom dealings. The mobster PC could make the perfect informant... especially if the mayor is in bed with one of his rivals. Such connections can easily develop into a working relationship or even a friendship, which makes belonging to the same group of companions an easy fit.

Above all, the GM should stress the party's common goals when running a mixed group with a mobster. An "enemy of my enemy" philosophy can work wonders for group unity; if they all have something to gain by working with each other — and if everyone in the party feels like they're staying true to their character — then the players will happily limit their differences to a few squabbles. The notion of common goals is

### WEAPONS

Mobsters will use any variety of weapons to enforce their will, from knives, garrotes, and ice picks to car bombs that can be detonated from blocks away. Two particular types of weapon, however, have come to define organized crime in the U.C.

Double-barreled shotguns were a holdover from the old world, where they were used on estates for fending off wolves and other wildlife. Mobsters would saw them off for easy concealment and use them to conduct assassinations. Fired from the back of a car, or produced on the spur of the moment from the folds of a longcoat, they are utterly devastating. Their only drawbacks are a lack of discriminatory fire and a slow reload time.

A more recent innovation has fallen into common use among established syndicates as well. The 316 Carbine, a submachine gun designed for close-range fighting, was produced in mass quantities during the war, and the surplus following the White Light meant that truckloads of them fell into the underworld's hands. Some syndicate members had fought in the war, and were intimately familiar with the gun. The high rate of fire made it ideal for their purposes — especially when carried in drums of 50 rounds or more. Its limited range was something of a problem, but in the tight confines of urban neighborhoods and back-alley gunfights, it was devastatingly lethal. Some police forces have actually requested quantities of the 316 for their own armories, afraid that the mobsters they are battling may possess a tactical advantage that must be countered.

especially helpful if the scenario centers around the mobster character. Straight-laced PCs can use it to justify their participation, and even filter it through their own motivations.

For instance, if the mobster's long-standing Don has been killed, the other characters could be tasked to help solve the crime. Murder is still murder, after all, and the police would have a vested interest in finding the assassin. Furthermore, a speedy arrest might prevent an all-out war, and keep the city's underworld stable and calm. A similar scenario might arise if the mobster has to protect a local card room from rivals; if the cops consider it a great spot for sniffing out much bigger crimes, or a detective enjoys going there for a few hands of poker each night, they might take steps to aid the gangster... even if they know it's for different reasons than he.

Setting up mobsters in non-mob-related scenarios is even easier. *Omertá* places a great emphasis on the repayment of debts, and a criminal PC who receives a good turn from a law-abiding character may feel obligated to help him out in the future. As above, he may provide aid if their goals coincide — for instance, investigating a crime that could bring down a rival — regardless of whether he owes the other characters anything or not. Some incidents may only affect the mobster indirectly, but still entail his working with the other charac-



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

ters. For instance, if a large amount of money is stolen from an armored truck, the police would tear up the city looking for it. The extra heat could be interfering with the organization's normal money-making efforts, prompting them to help find it even though they won't otherwise stand to gain.

Regardless of the scenario's circumstances, the GM can make it work simply by anticipating the needs of the PCs. By ensuring that the scenario fits with the motives of both the mobster and his non-criminal companions — even if those motives themselves differ from character to character — then they will all have a reason to work together, to seek the same outcome, and to pool their resources in pursuit of their goals.

## ROMANCE VS. REALITY

Films and television have long lionized gangsters as tragic anti-heroes, emphasizing their dark codes, their fierce loyalty, and their misplaced version of the Protestant work ethic. Such figures are often undone by their violent tendencies, but their motives are strangely honorable. They wish only for their fair share of happiness, and circumstances have forced them to use ruthless means to get it. When their path leads only to violence and death, they are mourned much the way a Greek or Shakespearean hero is mourned. If only their flaws hadn't finally overcome them...

This is the popular concept, immortalized in movies like *The Godfather* and cementing the image of the gangster in the popular subconscious. The reality of organized crime, however, is a far cry from that depicted on the silver screen. True life gangsters are petty, cruel, venal men leading lives of horrific violence. They take what they want by force, with little consideration of who they hurt in the process. Morality and ethics mean nothing to them, and the vaunted code of behavior enforced by the organization is little more than a fig leaf to cover up unspeakable offenses. They revel in their greed and tyrannical bullying, claiming power through intimidation and thuggish brutality. The Hollywood gangster with his solemn morality and willingness to make a deal has no place in their ranks. They're out for themselves; their organization exists solely to make as much money as they can any way they can.

Which version you play in your *Edge of Midnight* campaign depends entirely upon taste. Both extremes are legitimate options, and both have their own benefits and drawbacks. Members of the Few will likely fall along the romantic side of the scale, drawn by the mobster's strength and willingness to defy a corrupt and ineffective social system. Their honor becomes a sword and shield, like the detectives' code, which helps them parse right from wrong and make choices that — while not strictly legal — at least retain some moral consistency. Their position gives them power, which can be used to assist those less fortunate than they, and they often have the muscle to repel those who would take it from them. And unlike "law abiding" types, they refuse to sugar-coat their behavior, retaining a rough core of honesty beneath their criminal exterior.

On the other hand, such cavalier figures often lose sight of organized crime's darkest aspects. Some players might feel that a grittier, more realistic take on the mobster is appropriate to their campaign. Their characters are more apt to act

without conscience, taking what they want and thinking nothing of the consequences. The vaunted gangster's code is simply window dressing for them, meaningless words to be discarded when they become inconvenient. Such figures match very well with the cynical world of *noir*... though they may appear to be poor candidates for joining the Few, since they care little about the rest of the world. On the other hand, their harsh lives have given them a steely will, and the ugly things they witness means they can handle their share of dark secrets. If such characters felt the wool was being pulled over their eyes, they might move heaven and earth to learn how and why. Their efforts among the Few would likely come from their urge to dominate — to show the world that no one can deceive them — bolstered by a refusal to hide from life's harsh truths.

Most gangster players will likely fall somewhere between those two ends, neither completely romanticizing their characters nor committed solely to the amoral thuggery that real-life mobsters embody. The point they occupy along this scale will help define their personality, and by extension, the overall tone of the campaign.

## THE MOBSTER CAMPAIGN

An *Edge of Midnight* campaign can easily be composed completely of organized criminals, following in the footsteps of such classic films as *Scarface*, *The Godfather*, and *Once Upon a Time in America*. As part of their own crew, the characters will have to work their way through the ranks, fend off rivals, and try to dominate the city's underworld. The framework lends itself instantly to an extended story arc, and appropriate scenarios are easy to create and develop.

## CLASSIC GANGSTER STORY STRUCTURE

The perennial gangster story has a basic five-act structure, which makes an excellent template for an extended campaign.

### Early Roots

The early stages of the campaign detail the characters' backgrounds, where they come from, and why they opted for a life of crime. It will likely begin with the characters as young men or women, and cover both how they meet and why they decide to stick together. The scenarios at this stage are usually based around survival on the streets and making a name for oneself: acts of petty crime, ridding the local neighborhood of rivals, and aspirations to either join a larger organization or create one of their own. It ends either with their induction into the lowest ranks of a syndicate's hierarchy or establishing themselves as an independent force in the local underworld.

### Rise to Power

As the campaign progresses, the characters move more deeply into organized criminal activities. They serve as capos or foot soldiers for the syndicate, carrying out tasks at their

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

superior's behest. They run crooked gambling rings, hijack trucks, or mix it up with rival gangs. They might be called upon to perform an assassination or two, or keep their superiors safe if a mob war breaks out. They gradually learn the ropes, moving upward through the ranks as they defend their organization from external threats. Enemies within the organization are placated or disposed of as the characters display their efficiency to the Don and his underbosses.

Alternately, if they've established their own operations, they need to maintain them in the face of external pressure. The police will need to be paid off or avoided, competing operations shut down (usually forcibly), and existing activities protected from harm. In the early stages, they'll likely need to pay protection to a bigger crew, which carries its own set of tensions and scenario opportunities.

This section should take up a fair bulk of the campaign, as the players go about bettering themselves and their crew. It ends with them in powerful and influential positions: either underbosses serving the Don directly or as a burgeoning organization unto themselves, too big to legitimately be a part of any other crew.

### King of the Hill

With the characters now firmly established as powers within the order, the time has come to seize the top spot for themselves. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. If they're part of an established syndicate, they'll need to take rulership from the current Don. In an ideal world, he would die of old age, or retire after designating the characters as his heirs. But in *The Edge of Midnight*, ideals are hard to come by. Most likely, the Don will either die unexpectedly, prompting a scramble from several groups of underbosses... or the characters will need to engineer his exit themselves. Killing him off would take a great deal of planning, lest anyone else suspect foul play. If someone else does it for them, they'll still need to contend with rivals' efforts to seize the top spot for themselves (which creates the same sort of chaos as an unexpected death does). And of course, whatever the circumstance, they'll have to cement their power base before any other syndicates take advantage of the situation.

Independent operators face a similar task, though one posited in slightly different terms. Having set themselves up as a power unto themselves, they must now take the leap that gives them dominant control of a wide area — they must go from being a minor force to a major one. Usually, this means seizing additional territory from a rival crew, sometimes sparking a long and bloody gang war. Or they can engineer the destruction of a competing organization, then quickly move in to fill the void. Both circumstances require considerable will and a good sense of timing, as well as the forethought to anticipate any consequences. And of course, while they're busy solidifying their empire, their supposedly loyal underlings may be getting ideas of their own...

This section of the campaign ends with the characters firmly ensconced as the head of a major criminal organization.

### Stagnation

Now that they have become the top dog, the players will find a very large target painted on their backs, as everyone starts grasping at the power they have accrued. Competitors will stake out their territory, minions plot and scheme, and while the Don's word is law, it only lasts as long as he can back it up. Scenarios shift from acquiring power and new territory to defending what they've gained from attackers: blocking hits, wiping out challengers, and keeping their operations safe. They involve much more plotting and scheming, and less direct work; the Don can't lower himself to common shake-downs and leg breakings, can he?

Furthermore, the characters must constantly be on the alert for new enemies and carefully monitor the other syndicates in their city. They must watch for treachery from below as well, for plenty of supposedly loyal followers will be happy to claim their spot if they lower their guard. Legal authorities, too, will have their eye on the characters, as an arrest or indictment will strike a serious blow to the city's underworld.

The process leads to an overall sense of stagnation, as the need to maintain control slowly consumes the characters' lives. With no more worlds to conquer, they find themselves stranded atop their hard-won peak. From here, there's only one direction they can go...

### Downfall

There is no retirement home for mobsters. While a precious few live long enough to reach old age, the rest die — often quite messily — long before then. The theme of sin and repentance comes full circle as the characters must answer for their crimes. Maybe it's an indictment, leading to a sensational trial followed by a lengthy prison term. More likely, it's death from an assassin's bullet, brought down by their hated competitor from across town, or maybe an underboss who decides it's time for new blood. Perhaps they go quietly; perhaps they fight back and perish in a glorious hail of bullets. But whatever the circumstances, it spells the end of the characters and their campaign.

The downfall is usually fairly brief, constituting a single scenario covering the players' final days. It might be as short as a single scene — a sudden gunfight or an arrest that comes out of nowhere. While it may be brief, however, it requires a fair amount of foreshadowing. The players should be quietly prepared for its eventuality and ready to face it when it happens (though they may be unsure of the exact time and circumstance). Similarly, it should contain a sense of proper closure: a tragic end, a defiant end, or whatever suits your campaign. The players should leave with a sense of fulfillment and completion — satisfaction at the conclusion to their characters' story — even if the party winds up lying face down in a pool of their own blood.

Of course, there's always the chance that the party will ease gracefully into retirement: relaxing on some Borderlands beach or ensconced within the protected luxury of their fortress-like mansions. It's uncommon with the mob, but it does happen. Specific details of such retirement — and whether it still means the end of the campaign or not — are up to the GM.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## TURNING IT ON ITS EAR

The structure outlined above represents the gangster story at its most stereotypical. The rise and fall of powerful men makes for compelling drama, and the cyclical pattern of their stories results in an easy blueprint for enterprising GMs to follow. Sometimes, however, the classic structure might not work for a particular party, or the GM may wish to put his own unexpected spin on the formula. Below are a few ways to add a new wrinkle to a gangster campaign; countless more exist, of course, limited only by the GM's imagination.

### Unwilling Participants

Mobsters rarely take no for an answer, and may on occasion induct those who want no part of their organization. The easiest example is the son or the nephew of a prominent crime lord, pressured into joining the family business but secretly unhappy at such a lifestyle. Others may have joined with visions of high-flown romanticism in their head, only to become disenchanted with the constant hypocrisy and bloodshed. Still others find themselves drawn in bit by bit, forced to sell their soul piecemeal until they hardly recognize what they've become.

Reluctant mobsters have the high potential for dramatic conflict, which can make for fine storytelling. They will need to maintain their sense of morality in the face of heinous crimes, perhaps mitigating the damage they do, or even using their influence for good (see "Robin Hoods of the Streets," to the right, for more). They might wish to find some way out of the life: either to flee where their associates can't find them, or to arrange for an amicable departure. Neither way is easy. Many mob bosses see a desire to leave as tantamount to disloyalty and react violently. Characters who need money to stay hidden will likely take it from their employers, which will elicit an immediate price on their heads.

Unwilling mobsters must constantly walk a fine line — placating their superiors and acting as good family men while searching for that magic solution that will allow them to cut loose of their bonds. In the meantime, they will be faced with a constant array of choices: how to appear as efficient mobsters without violating their fragile and eroded sense of ethics.

### Peripheral Players

If full-time mobsters aren't your players' cup of tea, but you still wish to include them in mob-based scenarios, you can always set them up as peripheral players. Such figures have no

direct ties to organized crime, but neither are they entirely free of its apparatus. They include policemen or other legitimate figures on the take, childhood friends or relatives of current mobsters, private detectives willing to work for a known crime boss, and the like. For such figures, the mob becomes an occasional intrusion into their lives. Every now and then, they may be contacted and asked to perform a favor, or help resolve a problem. The exact nature of the errand depends on how much the character is willing to do, and can range from something completely legitimate (such as helping indict a rival crime lord) to the utterly criminal (such as participating in a theft or gangland hit). Once the incident is over, the character can go back to his normal life, his mob connection forgotten until the next time they require his services.

The rewards of such dabbling may be quite potent, and extra cash is just the beginning. Who wouldn't want a powerful Don owing them a favor, or a bit of extra muscle showing up at just the right moment? Yet it also raises ugly questions about the *true* purpose behind such activities, and whether an acceptable "good deed" is actually a fulcrum for something far more insidious. And the more one engages in such work, the harder it becomes to say "no" the next time — especially if it's a friend or family member doing the asking. The ties may be distant, but they can also be very firm... and can cause untold problems to the peripheral player who doesn't think clearly.

### Robin Hoods of the Streets

On the romantic end of the spectrum, the players may embrace the notion of gangster-as-savior — a hero to the common people who provides the protection and security which corrupt legal institutions do not. The money they make goes to aid the poor or dispossessed of their neighborhood, while their power helps protect the weak and downtrodden from other criminals. The stuffed shirts in city hall and arrogant heads of the police department care nothing for the common man. Only those with the will to act outside the system — to engage in acts which some would consider criminal — have what it takes to deliver true justice.

Many crime lords likely justify their actions with such rhetoric, but in the characters' case, it happens to be true. They see their crimes as a means to a nobler end, providing a few harmless vices in exchange for defending those who cannot defend themselves. A campaign in this vein will feature a strong streak of vigilantism, as the characters take on far more corrupt criminals, as well as the compromised forces of the law. Such figures must take care in what they do, however, for their code of honor is doubtless more rigid than those of other gangsters. Certain activities (such as narcotics trafficking) may be completely off-limits, and violence comes only as a reluctant necessity, not a quick fix. This places them at a disadvantage when dealing with more ruthless enemies, who will resort to dirty tricks more readily, and have access to more odious sources of cash to spend. And it will be tested by the fact that they are still criminals and their activities still harm someone, somewhere. More than a few gangsters in this vein have aspired to do only good... and still end up becoming the very monsters they battle so tenaciously.



## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

### The Godmother

Women, for the most part, do not participate directly in organized crime. *Omertà* and *onore* regard women as objects to be protected, and most female family members are carefully shielded from the inner workings of the organization. That doesn't prevent them from entering the proceedings more clandestinely, however. Woman closely associated with criminal figures — girlfriends, mistresses, mothers, daughters — can manipulate their men with ridiculous ease, turning the organization towards their own purposes. Indeed, more than one successful criminal syndicate has had a woman calling the shots — carefully hidden in the shadows, behind the meek façade of a quiet plaything.

In addition, the Commonwealth's increased opportunities for women in the legitimate workplace have slowly reverberated into the criminal underworld as well. Female mobsters, while unusual, are not entirely unheard of and a few capos and underbosses have begun to appear sporting skirts instead of pinstripes. The presence of such characters often causes friction with underlings, who don't relish taking orders from a female, but any woman tough enough to run with such a crew is more than capable of backing up her authority. (There are several real world cases to support the existence of such a figure: most notably Griselda Blanco, a key player in Miami's cocaine wars of the early 1980s.)

Campaigns featuring female gangsters are apt to emphasize politicking and role-playing, as gun molls and gangster's girls exploit their wiles to get what they want. They should have some viable reason for belonging to the mob (since few syndicates go out of their way to recruit female members) and understand that — despite the advances made by women in other fields — they are intruding in a fundamentally male game. The women who survive the mobster's life are some of the shrewdest and toughest you'll ever find. They have to be; it's the only way they can survive.

### CONFLICTS FROM WITHOUT

A criminal organization is almost a law unto itself, existing as predators in the urban jungle. When conflict comes in an all-mob campaign, it usually comes from other organizations intent on bringing the PCs down. Such organizations generally fall into one of two camps: fellow criminals and law enforcement officers.

Law enforcement groups are the most obvious, consisting of local police, the district attorney's office, and Agents of the National Law Enforcement Bureau. Any time a mobster character commits a crime, there's bound to be an investigation — which means that almost any mob-based scenario could lead to police involvement. Cops will ask questions, sniff around favored haunts, and generally make nuisances of themselves. They can be silenced with bribes, or thrown off the track, but more direct means of dealing with them often lead to trouble. Killing a cop is almost unforgivable; policemen close ranks around their own, and even those in the syndicate's pocket will go out of their way to ferret out the killer.

Sometimes, however, a shoot-out with the cops may be necessary to avoid arrest... and the police themselves aren't above killing a career criminal to spare the city a trial. Mobsters in such circumstances often find themselves on the run, cut loose from their organization and left to flee for their lives. The clever ones will find some way to elude it, perhaps arranging for a fall guy to take the blame. The rest will quickly become permanent fugitives, forever hiding from the consequences of their actions, or finally found and brought to justice. Such are the penalties for tackling the police too bluntly.

The NLEB is even worse, because they can't be readily bribed, and few syndicates are yet large enough to influence an appendage of the national government. Bureau Agents can become a monumental threat, especially if they decide to bring an entire syndicate down. Thankfully, their jurisdiction is more limited than that of the local cops, and they tend to leave such staples as gambling and extortion alone. Most gangsters steer clear of any Agents on their radar, and mob player characters would be well advised to emulate their example.

Criminals from outside the organization are another matter entirely. Rival gangs lack the façade of propriety that the police must adhere to, but they also lack the police's untouchable status. They can't go to the authorities for assistance, and if they're killed, the community will just shrug and say they had it coming. When dealing with rivals, the gloves can come off.

Of course, this isn't to say that the going will be any easier. An organization as large or larger than the characters' own can cause serious problems, especially if there's a loggerhead over territory or specific activities. Darwinism and Machiavellian necessity are the only mitigating factors: strength and power are all that demand respect. One can negotiate with one's foes, hoping to gain some kind of understanding, or else strike out at them through both clandestine and overt means. A quiet knifing in an alleyway can get rid of a troublesome individual quite easily... provided his bosses don't know it was you, or are too weakened to do anything about it. While all-out wars are rarely desirable (they're bad for business), they're sometimes necessary to settle intractable differences, and to establish a stable pecking order in a given city. Most large organizations are prepared to fight it out with their rivals should the situation call for it.

Other kinds of external threats are rare, but still take place from time to time. Public opinion can cause a mob no end of trouble if it turns against them. A crusading reporter who reveals a link between the organization and its political partners may prompt calls for reform (and the election of candidates whom the syndicate cannot control). Similarly, mob members who stray too far afield may find trouble coming home to them; a high roller who borrows too much from the bookies or a womanizer who cheats on his wife one time too many brings repercussions that the entire mob must deal with. Gangsters seldom anticipate such occurrences, but if left unchecked, they can cause considerable damage. A wounded lover can't simply be bought off and irate citizens can't all be browbeaten into submission. With such flare-ups, the character must act with delicacy and care: something no self-respecting gangster feels comfortable doing.



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD



## CONFLICTS FROM WITHIN

As dangerous as the police and other criminals can be, the true threat to an established organization is strife from within. For all their talk of honor and the tenets of *omertá*, many mobsters are quite happy to backstab their best friend if it means getting ahead. Some Dons will stress a unified front to their underlings, but secretly encourage rivalries in order to prevent anyone from growing powerful enough to challenge them. The instability which this fosters can doom even an entrenched criminal syndicate, reducing a formidable underworld force into scattered and bickering factions within the space of a few days.

A threat from within is often less overt than one from without, relying more on subtlety than force. The instigator is usually considered a friend or an ally — and in some cases has pledged an oath of loyalty to the characters. When such figures act, they act with supreme caution, and take great care to cover their tracks. The motives are usually obvious enough — a desire for more power, the elimination of competitors, or just simple dislike. The conflict need not be lethal; by amassing enough followers and cutting his rival out of any lucrative activities, a mobster can effectively position himself to victory. His foes are left without the leverage to actively oppose him, and can only seethe at their impotence before plotting anew.

Of course, you can always simply kill your rival, a practice more common than most Dons would prefer. Gangsters regard brutality as a way of life, and if someone gets on their nerves — regardless of how high he stands in the syndicate's territory — they're apt to put a bullet in him on general principles. If the victim is a superior (a made man), then the killer needs to think quickly in order to hide his complicity or else face an executioner's bullet himself. Even if he succeeds, the act may lead to repercussions. Strange disappearances never go over well, and the Don may start a war or take other drastic steps if a key underling goes missing. Canny mobsters prefer to let others do their dirty work, or else act only from a position of strength.

The organization's internal stability depends a large part upon the Don and how he chooses to govern those beneath him. Internal conflicts must be resolved quickly, lest they weaken the entire organization. At the same time, however, many Dons quietly revel in pitting their underlings against each other. It helps breed stronger lieutenants and prevents anyone from growing powerful enough to make a bid for the top spot. So a Don must strike a careful balance between loyalty to himself and the organization, and enough stability to ensure that his rule remains secure. The equation can be quite tricky, as some Dons learn too late. Too much chaos and the

## CHAPTER THREE: MOBSTERS

syndicate will implode. Too little, and the capos and underbosses will lay covetous eyes on the Don's seat. Truly successful Dons ensure that their underlings remain loyal to them, while carefully managing internal conflicts to keep them from spiraling out of control.

Regardless of internal circumstances, most mobsters will unite beneath their Don in the face of an external threat. Their squabbles are between them; bringing an outside party into play if you're gunning for the capo's spot or want to silence a mouthy rival is a quick way to get killed. And *omertà* can still take the edge off of the worst conflicts by reminding bickering parties of who they work for. Friendship and loyalty still count for something, though they can certainly be shunted aside when they become inconvenient. Player characters have a trump card in all of this because they have each other to rely on. Most parties have at least a modicum of *esprit de corps*, and when the chips are down, will turn to their friends across the table to help. That edge can help them maneuver against NPC competitors, and maintain a viable power base within the larger syndicate. (A PC's betrayal of another PC can make for fascinating role-playing, though it must be handled carefully to prevent any hurt feelings; a discussion on how to handle such inter-party intrigue can be found in *The Edge of Midnight* core rulebook, page 154).

### MOBSTER NPCs

#### JULIUS DULANO

Julius is a mid-level capo working for the Scarelli Mob in Central City. He runs a prime slice of Scarelli territory, collecting fees on three brothels, six underground casinos, and a plethora of other interests in the city's teeming lakeshore district. Ostensibly, he's a local businessman; though he keeps an office in a local mechanic's shop and doesn't appear to own a briefcase, he's worth millions of dollars.

Julius started out running errands for his cousin, a close associate of mob boss Angelo Scarelli. He sold stolen liquor out of the back of his car, helped clean guns belonging to older members, and even planned a few robberies of his own before he was made. He did them all with an air of detached professionalism, enjoying the sense of rebellion it conveyed but never letting his emotions run away with him.



He was formally made following an incident with a gaunt at the Friendly Boys mechanic's shop. The leatherback had applied for a job and been turned down because of his condition. He returned with a pair of gaunt friends, and was in the midst of pounding the owner senseless when Dulano walked in. He shot the first gaunt dead and held off the remaining two until other members of the Scarelli mob showed up. In gratitude, Antonio made him capo, granting him his protection and allowing him to use the Friendly Boys as his permanent headquarters.

Dulano is a good face man, always ready to help someone out with a little extra cash or muscle applied to the right irritant. Indeed, he views himself as a generous rich man, happy to spread his good fortune around to his friends and neighbors. There's a high price for his services, of course, but he's smart enough not to collect personally; he has plenty of flunkies to do that for him. His foot soldiers meet every morning before the Friendly Boys opens, where he explains the day's "chores" to them. Fearful of prosecution, he never writes anything down, instead committing it to memory. His underlings are unnerved at how well he remembers every task he assigns them and keep track of every dollar earned. He allows them to skim a bit off the top so long as they're not greedy, and none of his crew ever wants for money.

The local neighbors fear him, but not unduly so, and most pay monthly fees to his protection racket. To Dulano's credit, he has kept overt crime in the immediate area down; outsiders who think to rob one of "his" stores will have their legs crushed beneath the Friendly Boys' hydraulic car lift. His bodyguards are all mechanics at the shop. Some half-dozen are always working there when he's around, and they all carry handguns beneath their mechanics' overalls. One of them is a minor warlock, who enjoys using his abilities to fix cars when not protecting Dulano's behind. When the capo has to visit his superiors, he travels in a jet black limousine, kept in storage around the clock in case he needs it. The warlock mechanic always serves as his driver.

Dulano is short, about five-foot eight, with black hair and a thick mustache. He keeps himself in good shape by working a heavy bag hanging in the back of his office. He can usually be found in shirtsleeves and suspenders, though his clothes and workplace are always immaculately clean. His desk contains carefully organized receipts of the Friendly Boys' proceeds, and a large chalkboard behind the desk lists various incoming and outgoing repairs. None of it has even the slightest taint of illicit money to it; an accountant going through his desk would find nothing but above-the-boards materials. Scarelli uses the place as a money launderer, which depends solely upon Dulano's outstanding memory, and a set of books kept as far away from the Friendly Boys as possible.

Personally, Dulano comes across as warm and friendly, like an uncle who enjoys corny jokes a little too much. If someone in the neighborhood comes to him for a loan, or asks for a couple of bruisers to help out with a strike, he handles it the same way he would a small child asking to borrow a quarter. He speaks in calm, measured tones and always looks people in the eye. His propensity for violence is as strong as any mobster, but he always has an explanation for the harm he inflicts;

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

he'll deliver beatings or stabbings with a matter-of-fact verbal rundown of the victims' various transgressions. He retains the same prejudice against gaunts as Scarelli himself, though he never lets it show to outsiders. In recent years, Dulano has become a go-between for outsiders wishing to speak to Scarelli or his underlings. Anyone who has business with the higher-ups in the Scarelli mob would be well advised to seek him out.

## Julius Dulano

**Attributes:** Brains 6, Brawn 6, Build 7, Gut 6, Moxie 5, Smoothness 6.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 35.

**Skills:** Athletics 4, Brawl 7, Evasion 7, Firearms 6, Intimidation 7, Perception 7, Streetwise 8.

**Backgrounds:** Alert, Rugged, Wise.

**Profession:** Gangster 2.

## JOHNNY DING

Gateway's Tongs are a fractious collection of loosely organized gangs, kept together only by the looming threat of outside forces. One of the principle architects of that unity is Junyan Ding, a first-generation immigrant and leader of the White Fortress Tong. Ding, who goes by the moniker of "Johnny," serves on the Dynasty — the council of leaders who handle affairs between the Tongs and the outside world. He is blessed with both the strength of youth and the wisdom to know how to use it, rapidly establishing himself as a force to be reckoned with on the streets of Eastowne.

Ding came to the U.C. sometime before the war; the exact details of his crossing are hazy and recalled only in dreams or drunken stupors. He remembers being herded into a cargo hold with nearly a three dozen others, fed cold rice and brackish water for weeks on end, and arriving in Gateway only to find a hellish purgatory in the depths of a Tong-owned sweatshop. He fled the first chance he got, joining up with a rival Tong for protection against his "owners." He killed the sweatshop manager with a straight razor a few weeks later, as his new elder brothers looked on. The war years brought an increased influx of goods and supplies, and Johnny — still barely out of his teens — found the black market to be a natural fit. He sold cooking oil and surplus rations at a marked-down price, often stolen from the nearby naval bases and delivered right to the streets of Eastowne. The natives, struggling under enforced rationing laws, bought up his supplies eagerly, and his brothers looked upon him as a leader worth watching.

When the war ended, he began moving the White Fortress away from its street gang roots and towards a more organized enterprise. His efforts met with the approval of many of the more forward-thinking Tong members... though not with his *da ge*, who viewed them as an attempt to seize control of the gang. Those views proved correct when Ding challenged the man to a ritualized duel. The man agreed, thinking that the little street rat had grown soft. How wrong he was. Though

Ding suffered a nasty cut along his right arm, he took the *da ge*'s head in exchange, and immediately assumed the man's position with no further dissent from his brothers.

Since then, he has expanded the White Fortress into several lucrative new areas. The end of the war meant no more black market, but thefts from the U.C. armed forces have continued, now including weapons and ammunition. Ding brings opium in from across the sea and has expanded his protection rackets into a veritable taxation system, complete with accountant's charts and varying rates for different sorts of businesses. The White Fortress's mah-jongg parlors are among the most profitable in the city. The only thing he refuses to touch is immigrant labor. He remembers the horrors he escaped as a youth and has vowed to never inflict such misery upon another human being.

His clout with the other Tongs is quite high. Younger gangs see him as a model of success, while more established lodges see him as pragmatic and reasonable. He's survived his share of assassination attempts, of course, and his street instincts have never waned from lack of use, but even his enemies afford him an unusual amount of respect. He has constantly argued for unifying the Tongs, and his efforts to make peace between rival factions has led to the current structure of Dynasties and arbitration. If the Tongs are to seriously challenge the Patterson brothers and other established syndicates, they will need Johnny Ding to lead the way.

Like many other Tong leaders, Ding places a great deal of emphasis on dressing well. While underlings may clothe themselves in garish colors and walk the streets like a pack of ruffians, Ding's suits are always pressed and his ties always in fashion. Despite his high-toned appearance, however, he remains an intimidating specimen: tall and lean, with close-cropped black hair and dead brown eyes. His Asian features are heavy and scarred with pockmarks, and his menacing croak can send shivers down the strongest spine. A scar running from the palm of his right hand up the length of his arm serves as a reminder of his violent heritage, and of the martial arts at which he excels. Those who meet him for the first time are surprised at such a brutish-looking man speaking eloquently about life and philosophy. His English is quite good and he has slowly grown used to dealing with people outside of Eastowne. Someday, he hopes to use the White Fortress as the foundation of a huge business, rivaling even the giants of New Eden in scope and industry. No one who has ever met him doubts that he can accomplish it.

## Johnny Ding

**Attributes:** Brains 7, Brawn 6, Build 7, Gut 9, Moxie 5, Smoothness 8.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 35.

**Skills:** Appraisal 4, Athletics 8, Bureaucracy 5, Etiquette 3, Evasion 8, Intimidation 7, Martial Arts 10, Medicine 4, Melee 8, Perception 5, Puzzles 3, Stealth 4, Streetwise 8, Throwing 5.

**Backgrounds:** Acrobatic, Education, Exotic Knowledge.

**Profession:** Gangster 3, Street Tough 2, Wealthy 1.

# CHAPTER FOUR PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES



™Any time you try a decent crime,  
you got fifty ways you can fuck up.  
If you think of twenty-five of them,  
then you're a genius...  
and you ain't no genius.

- Teddy Lewis (Mickey Rourke),  
Body Heat



## PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES

*The sound of dogs was faint in the distance, but grew louder as the two men paused to catch their breath. They were dressed in the distinctive blue coveralls of the Fuller Plains prison, I.D. numbers stenciled in the back and on the lapel. The thin one was a gaunt, all knees and elbows bound together with stringy muscle. His companion was shorter but more solidly built, his barrel-like physique marked by thatches of dark body hair.*

*"How long, Jaffords?" the normal panted at the gaunt.*

*"Thirty minutes. Maybe less." Jaffords reached down and tugged at the leg irons which locked the men together. "Dogs get the scent, they're not going to stop until they run us to ground."*

*He produced a thin shard of metal from one of his pockets and began prying at the chains with it. Its length was stained crimson; that bastard screw Bennett had been laying into them pretty thick, which is why Jaffords had chosen him as the launching point for today's little field trip. The bus had taken a tight turn too quickly; add a piece of steel jammed into the guard's windpipe and a loose window grill which Jaffords and a buddy had spotted on the bus a few weeks before, and they had been off to the races.*

*The shiv made little headway against their bonds, however. Jaffords supposed he might be able to bend the metal out of its clasp eventually, but he'd probably amputate his ankle in the process.*

*"So what's the plan?" his companion queried. The man's name was Parfey. He had been serving a ten-year stretch for wounding a policeman in the course of an armed robbery. He wasn't the best partner to be chained too, but no one had asked Jaffords for his opinion on the matter.*

*"There's a set of train tracks a few miles up ahead," the gaunt gestured into the forest they had been traversing. "If we're lucky, we can catch a freight train that will take us all the way into Central City."*

*"And if we reach Central City?" Parfey asked.*

*"First we've got to get rid of these," the gaunt jerked at the leg irons as the sound of barking dogs grew closer.*

*"Then we've got to learn how to turn invisible."*

## THE WANTED AND THE WALLED-IN

Two of the greatest concerns for any criminal are 1) the possibility of going on the lam and 2) the possibility of going to prison. Both represent the most significant consequences to an illegal endeavor (beyond the obvious one, which ends at the local cemetery). Both can also become an engaging part of any *Edge of Midnight* campaign.

Prison life marks the capture, arrest, and conviction of a character for any number of specified crimes. First-time offenders are often surprised to learn that illicit activity of all sorts takes place in prisons, and that the nature of society inside contains its own share of dangers and rewards. Life in the big house can be harsh and unyielding, and survival often depends on keeping your wits about you.

Similarly, life on the run has a unique set of difficulties. A fugitive endures a sense of constant anxiety: looking over his shoulder for fear of being followed, wondering where his

next meal will come from, trying to find a place where he can breathe without fear. He may enjoy a better quality of life than a prisoner, but that life is based on a lie — a hollow fabrication designed to conceal his status. When and if his pursuers catch up to him, it often comes as a relief. At least then the eternal uncertainty is over and done with.

Both conditions are possibilities for the criminally inclined character. Experienced lawbreakers learn to accept them as hazards of the profession, while wrongly-targeted innocents view them as Kafka-esque nightmares which they are ill-prepared to endure. Either way, they embody the underworld at its most desperate... and, if handled correctly, its most exciting.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part, "Fugitives," deals with characters who find themselves on the run — either from the police or from other, less pleasant antagonists. The second part, "Prisoners," covers trials and convictions from a role-playing perspective, as well as tips on running a campaign from inside penitentiary walls.

## FUGITIVES

A fugitive is defined as someone fleeing from active pursuit, and for whom that flight plays a central role in his or her thinking. It comprises those trying to avoid arrest, those hiding from long-past misdeeds, and those fleeing specific underworld figures or other ne'er do wells. Such characters are marked by a life in constant transition, moving from one place to the next in an effort to stay one step ahead of their pursuers. Some are able to construct a life for themselves — building a new identity and trying to forget the sins of their past — but even that is a house of cards, threatening to tip over at the first sign of their old lives.

## PURSUERS

The defining common factor for any fugitive character is pursuit. Someone is chasing them, and they consider the consequences of being found worse than staying put and facing the music. The exact nature of their pursuer usually defines the reasons why a fugitive might choose to flee, and what methods may be deployed to capture him.

### Law Enforcement

By far the most common pursuers are the police, who believe the fugitive guilty of some crime or another. The fugitive flees in order to avoid the possibility of jail (or worse if the crime in question invokes the death penalty). If he's innocent, he may try to gather evidence that exonerates him (see the section starting on page 102 for more). Otherwise his aim is to stay out of law enforcement hands for as long as possible. Either way, his pursuers have vast resources with which to help track him. All points bulletins read over the radio can alert citizens to his description. Police in other cities can be notified and told to watch for him. Wanted posters in post of-

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES



fices and other locales can provide a photograph, along with a physical description. In the most pressing cases, a reward will be offered for information leading to the fugitive's capture.

When seeking a given fugitive, law enforcement will take a two-pronged approach. The first is to track him or her using traditional crime-solving techniques. Known associates will be interviewed, probable whereabouts will be searched, etc. The process yields clues as to the fugitive's whereabouts or destination, which the police will use to slowly hem him or her in. As they get closer, they may watch key locations such as an airport or bus station, or set up roadblocks in an effort to catch the fugitive trying to slip through.

The second aspect of their hunt entails public awareness. By alerting average citizens to the fugitive's description, they increase the chances of him being spotted or recognized. Cash rewards can be used to elicit information from known associates, while radios and newspapers can notify the entire nation about the pursuit. That way, the fugitive needs to worry about more than just the police recognizing him. Every trip to the store, every walk to the corner, every stop at a restaurant or filling station could lead to his identification.

In both instances, the police benefit from a huge amount of manpower, as well as other resources. Their methodology in apprehending fugitives takes maximum advantage of these

benefits. They can canvas wide areas for signs of their quarry, or go door to door to inform local residents of the situation. They can set up roadblocks or perform careful searches, closing every avenue or inquiry through sheer weight of numbers. The benefits of such tactics mean that very little is overlooked; the chances of the fugitive finding some unseen means of escape are slim. Furthermore, by appealing to the public for help, the police make everyone the fugitive comes into contact with a potential enemy, further isolating him and keeping the pressure on even if he's outside their reach for the time being.

On the downside, a large number of people makes it difficult to adequately coordinate efforts, and reacting to new developments is very slow. The fugitive, on the other hand, can move at will, evading their slow plodding efforts if he's cunning enough. Similarly, large numbers of people searching a given area can sometimes destroy the very evidence they're searching for, trampling it or simply overlooking it amid the glut of details. Some law enforcement searches will limit the manpower expended for precisely these reasons. Fewer police means that they can react more quickly, and pursue their fugitive with the flexibility the chase may sometimes demand. Of course, that also leaves the fugitive with fewer adversaries to deal with as well...

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## Prisons

This category includes any established institutions in which inmates are forcibly incarcerated, such as lunatic wards, juvenile homes, or government work camps. Prison officials usually act as direct pursuers only in the earliest stages of pursuit — when one of their unwilling occupants effects an escape. The reasons for such departures are obvious — prison is rarely a happy experience, and those who escape hope to find permanent freedom from their incarceration. Pursuits involving prison officials focus almost exclusively on the first few hours of freedom — that harrowing chase between clearing the prison walls and reaching some populated area to find a more permanent hiding place.

When an escape is first detected, guards, dogs, and other individuals will be dispatched in pursuit. Most prisons use sirens and floodlights in an attempt to spot any fugitives fleeing from the immediate area, and if numbers permit, will dispatch search parties to seek out any trail left behind. Many prisons and similar institutions are located far away from civilization, forcing escapees to travel miles of empty countryside before reaching comparative safety. This gives officials a considerable leg up in the earliest stages of a chase. The warden or institution chief usually alerts the local police, who can bring in additional personnel to help (and take over if the fugitive isn't apprehended within the first few hours). The cops can set up cordons, hunt down any trails, and stop any vehicles approaching or leaving the prison. Dogs are particularly useful, since they can track the fugitive by scent, and the typically limited numbers of roads and highways in the area means that the authorities can monitor them without hindrance. During daylight hours, the prison may also enlist the aid of crop dusters and other airborne vehicles, hoping to spot their quarry from the air.

The terrain often provides prison officials with a distinct advantage over their quarry. They know the area and with little civilian presence, need never worry about the fugitive losing himself in a crowd. Their guards often know the landscape quite well, and can point out any game trails, abandoned sheds, or the like between the prison and the nearest town. They can count on the cooperation of the police, and if the fugitive escapes immediate re-capture, then the news media will help spread the word of his escape as well. The disadvantages are bound up in the prison's primary duty to guard every inmate, meaning that it cannot expend all of its resources hunting those who get away. Consequently, its reach is rather limited and it must often rely on outsiders for help. If an escapee isn't apprehended within a few hours, the local police usually take over all aspects of the investigation, following the procedures outlined in "Law Enforcement," on page 96.



## Mobsters and Other Criminals

Sometimes, law enforcement has nothing whatsoever to do with a fugitive's flight. His pursuers are much nastier and have no compunctions about bringing a permanent halt to the chase. Organized criminals are among the most terrifying and relentless foes, making up in savagery what they lack in numbers and resources. Going on the lam from the mob could involve any number of reasons — there are countless ways to cross a syndicate, from welshing on a loan to killing one of its number. Once the fugitive decides to flee, however, he eliminates any chance of resolving the issue peacefully. A simple collection job or romantic spat will escalate to lethal proportions if the mob thinks he's trying to evade them. They will lose too much face if they let such an affront go unpunished. Similarly, flight from the mob means that the fugitive can't or won't go to the police for help — either because he fears legal punishment for some criminal act, or because he thinks the cops are incapable of protecting him from his pursuers... or perhaps even in league with them.

Underworld figures who need to find a fugitive have several recourses open to them. Like the police, they can conduct an investigation into his whereabouts, either using their own members or hiring a private detective to do it for them. They will often behave as the police do, questioning associates and loved ones who may have knowledge of their quarry's whereabouts. Such questions can often turn brutal, since criminals have few compunctions about torturing or killing people for information. Most syndicates have numerous underworld connections, which helps them ferret out leads more effectively than the police. Those most in a position to help a fugitive — fences, smugglers, and the like — can just as easily point the finger in his direction, while informants at bus stations and train depots can be convinced to reveal what they know for a few C-notes.

Indeed, money forms another key tool for criminals on the hunt. If they have the means, they can place a price on the fugitive's head, offering large sums of cash for news of his whereabouts. Such rewards are often much greater than similar bounties offered by law enforcement officials. Even the most upstanding citizen has a hard time resisting cash in exchange for a little "harmless information," and criminal syndicates usually have plenty of reserves to grease the wheels of an investigation. When that fails, a syndicate will turn to intimidation, extorting the information they need through threat of beatings or the like. Their methods are rarely subtle, but they get results. Those initially inclined to harbor the fugitive will change their tune once a wad of bills gets flashed in their face... or a few fingers get broken.

One the other hand, such tactics can also provide the fugitive with a great deal of warning, giving him time to flee or think of another plan. This tends to unduly prolong the pursuit, forcing the syndicate to spend more time and resources in hunting down its quarry. Smart criminals will forego the heavy-handed tactics except in extreme circumstances, but that too takes time. They can't use radio or newspapers the

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES

way the police can, or solicit the public at large for help in their efforts. They must therefore rely on the most direct leads — the fugitive's acquaintances or accomplices, known hangouts, and the like — and if they don't wish to alert their foe, they must make sure that word of their inquiries never leaks back to him.

When the time is right, however, criminal pursuers can often funnel considerable resources into the problem — both in terms of money and firepower. When the mob strikes at its quarry, the results are quick and merciless. The fugitive often has little idea he's even been spotted before the bullets start flying. And unlike the police, criminals often have no need to capture their prey alive. Though some vengeful Don may want to make a specific example out of someone, most are happy with a corpse full of bullet holes and reassurance that the target suffered.

### Individuals

This category includes ostensibly “law abiding citizens” who don't have the resources of the police or government at their beck and call, and who refuse to engage in the intimidation and violence of criminal pursuers. Private citizens will usually turn to the police for aid by reporting a crime, filling out a missing persons report, or the like. (Such cases follow the tactics outlined in “Law Enforcement,” above.) Sometimes, however, they will take matters into their own hands, either launching private inquiries in addition to the police's efforts (usually because they have little faith in cops) or refusing to involve the police at all (usually because they don't want the law poking into their affairs).

Fugitives may flee an individual for any number of reasons, limited only by the figures involved. They may be family members on the run from a tyrannical patriarch or debtors who owe a great deal of money. They may have stolen something valuable from their pursuer, or harmed him or her more directly through a criminal assault. They may simply be uninterested in answering their pursuer's questions. Whatever the reason, their flight matches those evading criminal pursuers in that the fugitive won't or can't go to the police for help. Either their pursuer is too powerful to be coerced by police action, or the fugitive has done something which could get him in trouble. In any case, fleeing may initially seem easier, since an individual pursuer can be more readily evaded than any formal organization (legal or otherwise).

The key resource for any individual pursuing a fugitive is the private detective, whose skills are uniquely suited to the task and who will often do the job without asking questions. A pursuer might use alternative resources, such as a concerned friend or the like, but such figures invariably do the same job as a private eye. Wealthy patrons can hire dozens of gumshoes to seek out their quarry, though too many detectives are often counterproductive. Most just use a single agency or individual, paying a set fee plus daily expenses for him or her to pursue whatever trail can be found.

In these cases, the chase amounts to a contest of wits between the investigator and the fugitive. If the fugitive hides his tracks well enough, he will confound the P.I. and stay hidden, while a patient and diligent detective will eventually ferret out

### THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING CAUGHT

Regardless of who's chasing the fugitive or why he might be running, the consequences of getting caught should be crystal clear. It motivates the character's actions more than any other factor; without it, there would be little need to go on the lam at all. Only the threat of some dire repercussion is enough to send someone away from his home, job, and family, into a situation fraught with peril and uncertainty. Even a savage beating or other violence is rarely enough to prompt such a flight. Generally speaking, it takes one of three potential consequences to set someone on the run... and more importantly, to keep him there:

*Disgrace* is a fairly uncommon motivation, though it has sharp teeth. The ignominy of a bankruptcy, exposed love affair, or the like can have a devastating effect in the right circles, as shame and public humiliation prompt the fugitive to abandon his life in favor of hidden anonymity. Once such steps are taken, the fugitive rarely feels inclined to return and face the music. He wants only to forget his disgrace and find some way to start over. His pursuers are generally individuals: family members, financial officials, and the like. The police will investigate the matter only as a missing persons case, and those in dutch with criminal organizations have a lot more than abject humiliation to worry about.

*Prison* is by far the most prevalent consequence for those fleeing the law. A long stint in jail, with all the horrors and torments which that entails, is often enough to send the most level-headed fugitive on the lam. A life looking over your shoulder usually sounds better than one trapped in a dank cell, surrounded by thugs and murderers who will cheerfully cut your throat for a roll of toilet paper. In such cases, the fugitive flees only when he feels his legal recourses are minimal — that is, he has almost no chance of escaping sentence — or when flight is the only way he sees of buying the time to clear his name.

With either of these consequences, however, surrender is always an option. The fugitive may tire of being chased and give himself up, or eventually be hunted down. *Death*, however, is enough to keep someone running forever. If a fugitive's pursuers intended to kill him, then he has no choice but to evade them. A death sentence usually only comes from criminal pursuers, though the police may resort to it if they feel it warranted (or if the crime in question merits the death sentence). If the fugitive knows the stakes, then he's apt to act with more desperation and recklessness. He may come out shooting when finally cornered, for example, or seek to kill his pursuers rather than being constantly chased. But regardless of his actions, the enormity of the consequences weighs upon everything he does, turning his time on the lam into a primal struggle for sanity and survival.



## GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD



his target's location. The P.I.'s employer rarely becomes involved, at least initially. He or she often has other matters to attend to (such as job, a family, etc.), and leaves the P.I. to his work. Once the fugitive's location has been pinpointed, he or she can then step in and determine how best to proceed.

The benefits and drawbacks of an individual pursuit depend largely upon the individual doing the pursuing, and upon the detective(s) or other agents he has hired. A single investigator can move with ease and flexibility, responding to unexpected developments while drawing little attention to himself in the process. He can assemble his clues quietly, and follow the target quite closely once he tracks him down. The downside comes from the investigators relative lack of resources. There's only so much a single man can do, and once the obvious leads dry up, the trail may turn cold very quickly. Individual pursuers usually either find their quarry within a few days, or are obliged to wait a long time before any word arrives.

### No One

Perhaps the most disturbing form of pursuit is that which doesn't stem from a pursuer at all. The fugitive flees before figments of his imagination — convinced that he has either done something worthy of persecution or that some powerful organization has put the finger on him. In that sense, there is little he can do to evade his "pursuers." They will find him no matter where he hides, their torment coming from the corners of his imagination rather than any tangible location. Members of the Few sometimes succumb to such persecutory delusions; their clarity into the mysteries of the world unhinges their mind such that they see hidden enemies everywhere.

Portraying such persecution is a considerable challenge, which the player and the GM should thoroughly discuss beforehand. It must be played out solely from the fugitive's perspective, fed by incidental details which play off of the

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES

character's paranoia. Is that man in the coffee shop eyeing him over the morning paper? Does that car in the rearview mirror look a little too familiar? Was that a backfire up the street or a gunshot aimed at his head? As those details come together, they prompt the fugitive to once more go into hiding, to change his identity, or to pull up stakes and move again. But no matter where he goes or how thoroughly he covers his tracks, *they* invariably hunt him down again and again...

An enterprising GM can combine descriptions of such delusions with more tangible forms of persecution. Maybe the cops are harassing the character, though only for a few misdemeanors instead of the monstrous crimes the character believes. Or a local loan shark is pushing for some money the character owes, but only a small amount instead of the vast fortune in the character's mind. The trappings of reality can increase his or her sense of persecution, and give the player pause as to what's a real problem and what's simply a figment of his character's imagination.

Tangible pursuit of a minor variety might also help convince other PCs that their friend's fears are genuine, or at least provide them with a real problem to confront. The less the character can differentiate between the demons of his mind and the foes in real life, the more his "delusional" enemies will come to life. If it feels real, then the player will be far more motivated to act on them than he would if he knew they were just a figment of his character's imagination.

The character's motivation is all-important in this instance. With no "real" persecutors to chase him, it falls to his own background to provide the impetus for becoming a fugitive (though he and/or his player may not be aware of it). Perhaps he suffered a mental breakdown after a trauma of some sort. Perhaps he was the target of genuine persecution at one point, but his pursuers have either forgotten about him or given up. The cause of the character's mental state — whether known or not — will help explain what he sees and why... and also form the basis for a solid mystery to solve should it feel right for the campaign.

### LIFE ON THE LAM

Once a fugitive goes on the run, everything about his life changes. He is uprooted, left without foundation or compass, and forced to remain on the fringes of society. He must constantly look over his shoulder for signs of pursuit, and any respite he gains will be short-lived at best. In order to survive, he must adopt new skills and learn a new way of living. If he doesn't, he'll be found and caught before he can say "one bus ticket to the border, please."

#### Initial Flight

The first — and often most intense — task of a fugitive is to escape notice long enough to get away. He must overcome the initial barricades to his flight, whether it be slipping around a police roadblock or making it to the bus station without the loan shark and his muscle noticing. In some cases, it's an active chase, as the fugitive tries desperately to shake his

pursuers before going to ground. Other times, it's more passive, hoping not to attract any attention in the first place. But it's always a harrowing experience for the fugitive: pulling up stakes and hastily throwing some things into a suitcase before heading to the waiting taxi, the train depot, or the hidden compartment in the bed of a truck. If the law is after him, they may stop the vehicle he is in and search it. If it's criminals, they could pull up at any time and open fire. Everything is pins and needles, keeping the fugitive on edge until he finds some modicum of temporary safety.

If he's in a direct chase, the primary obstacles will be physical: outdistancing any pursuers (either on foot or in a vehicle), finding a safe place to hide, or the like. If his escape is less blatant, then his primary challenge will be keeping cool, or perhaps using his social skills to talk his way past a check-point or throw a mob informant off the scent. The initial flight ends when such obstacles have been overcome: when the fugitive has evaded any pursuers and has a moment to catch his breath. He usually holes up somewhere — a hotel, a cabin in the woods, anywhere that can't be immediately traced — and takes stock of his situation. If he needs to sleep or eat, he will do so, as well as healing any wounds (provided they don't require hospital attention). From there, he can decide where to proceed next.

#### Procuring Necessities

Now formally on the run, it falls to the fugitive to decide how to stay away from his pursuers indefinitely. He'll need food and supplies in the short term: a place to sleep, a few dollars in his pocket, and the modicum of a routine to avoid drawing suspicion. He may have a permanent destination in mind (south of the border, perhaps, or in search of clues to clear his name) in which case, he'll need to secure transport and determine how to cross any official boundaries (which may require papers and the like). Those with the luxury of forethought will have the money to do this; otherwise, the fugitive must expose himself, either by taking a job or resorting to theft in order to acquire the money he needs.

Both options have risks. Theft entails a police report, which can easily draw the attention of pursuers, while a job involves potential witnesses (bosses, customers, etc.) who may be able to identify him. Thefts tend to be simple snatch-and-grab jobs, since the fugitive rarely has the time or resources to plan out anything elaborate. The more he engages in such activity, the more likely the police will pick up his trail, hunting him for robbery regardless of any other motivation they may have. Taking a job is much more viable, since it entails no law breaking and can easily be done with anonymity. Farm hands, short order cooks, and the like come and go with the wind; the pay is steady, and the constant stream of them makes it harder to identify any single one should investigators come sniffing around.

How one procures money also depends on what methods one is using to avoid detection. If the fugitive is constantly on the move, then he only takes what he can before heading down the road to the next stop. On the other hand, those who hole up in one specific spot can take a more permanent position (though

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

always watching those around them closely). Much depends on how much the fugitive feels he needs, and whether or not he has any specific goal besides evasion. In addition to food and shelter, he may need to watch for signs of pursuit: acquiring a police radio, for example, or hiring a paid informant at the train station. He'll need a path of easy escape, such as a car or a prepaid bus ticket (which also cost money), and which must be factored in in case the fugitive's pursuers draw too close.

## Allaying Suspicions

"Walk, don't run," is the sage advice for many fugitives. Those who appear to be hiding something usually are, and a panicked, flighty individual will draw considerably more attention than someone quietly minding his own business. Successful fugitives quickly learn how to assuage the suspicions of others, and to blend into whatever surroundings are closest at hand.

Luckily for them, the fringes of society hold plenty of people who don't want to be found. Stepping into their ranks is fairly easy; employers learn not to ask probing questions when looking for a janitor or the like, and most fugitives have few friends or acquaintances to deceive. By keeping their heads down and not interfering with others, they can usually keep most people from asking questions.

The difficulty comes when the fugitive needs anything more than a cup of coffee or a broom to push. Getting across the border, for example, often requires a snakehead in the know, or phony documents to show the border guards. Attempting to clear one's name means poking around in odd places — usually frequented by the very people trying to catch the fugitive — while trying to identify any pursuers can lead to uncomfortable questions. All of which works against the fugitive's efforts to sink into anonymity. The more he makes a mark on the world — the more he distinguishes himself with goals, ambitions, or questions — the more likely he is to be noticed... and caught. Few people can exist for any length of time without making acquaintances or drawing attention. Even those hoping to be forgotten will catch someone's eye somewhere. And if they seek only to stay hidden, they may be blinding themselves to approaching pursuit.

Clever fugitives learn to couch their flight with an innocuous cover story — one which allays suspicion while allowing them to pursue whatever line of inquiry they wish. Phony names go without question, but some fugitives work up more of a background to handle awkward inquiries. The more plausible their story seems, the easier it will be to get what they need, and the less likely that a pursuer will uncover them. Documents like driver's licenses or phony badges lend more credibility, as does a casual approach to the social milieu. If the fugitive appears to belong, then people will assume he does; if he has good reasons for being somewhere, the average citizen won't question his presence in the future. Over time, a fugitive may even create an entirely new identity through this process: a new life untouched by the sins of the past. Such identities are a most effective means of camouflage; creating new friendships and cementing new ties covers old tracks quite nicely, as long as no one near you gets too curious about where you came from.

Of course, that's the essential trick to allaying suspicion... and even in the best of circumstances, it can be difficult to pull off. Most fugitives find they can never make a clean break, and that no matter how hard they try, links still remain to whatever it is they're fleeing. Eventually, the right investigator will ask the right questions, or someone new will start digging, and then all of the fugitive's hard work will be for naught.

## Destination/End Game

Wandering aimlessly takes an insufferable toll on the mind and spirit, leaving even the strongest men little more than walking husks. Sooner or later, every fugitive must ask himself where his flight is going, and whether he can do anything to end his wandering. The exact circumstances depend on why the fugitive is fleeing, but every case has the potential for closure, even if the odds against reaching it are long. It can help determine what the fugitive must achieve before his flight can end, and what tools he'll have to assemble to accomplish the job.

The simplest goal is to find a place of permanent safety: somewhere that no pursuer can follow, allowing the fugitive to go about his life without looking over his shoulder at every turn. It could be deep in the Borderlands, where the U.C. authorities can't reach and even gangsters are hard-pressed to put up a chase. It could be across the sea, to the gray and nebulous lands on the other side of the ocean where none of the Few have yet reached. It might even be some secretive place inside the U.C.: some out-of-the-way locale where visitors are scarce. Though the security offered by such locales is never airtight, they still provide a long-term goal for even the most rootless fugitive to seek. He will require either a great deal of money (enough to live on for an entire lifetime), or an anonymous means of supporting himself. Barring that, it means running the gauntlet of a border crossing, shipyard check or the like; dodging any pursuers or other dangers; and most importantly, making sure that any and all traces of his "final flight" are eliminated before his escape.

Safety is often less a place, however, than a state of mind. Many fugitives have moved heaven and earth to reach what they feel was permanent safety, only to find themselves still sleeping lightly for fear of their pursuers discovering them. But if they could eliminate the *sense* of pursuit as well as its reality, then their flight would truly come to an end. It isn't easy of course. The most effective method is for the fugitive to fake his own death, which will immediately end any manhunt,



## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES



and send investigators home content that their quarry is now out of reach. But doing so requires careful preparation, a good plan, and (in some cases) a substitute corpse to stand in for the fugitive's own. If not executed properly, it may have the opposite effect, providing pursuers with a wealth of new clues to investigate.

Other methods are easier to facilitate, but more difficult to make stick. A particularly clever fugitive may lay down a phony trail: buying false bus tickets, making reservations in hotel rooms, even “losing” personal effects in places where they are likely to be found... all drawing a line far away from the fugitive's actual destination. Such a scheme requires a similar level of planning, although a competent accomplice could do the job just as easily. The trouble is that sooner or later, the investigator will realize he's on the wrong trail, and retrace his steps. Similar tactics can be used multiple times, but all of them entail the same sort of risk.

More proactive fugitives consider their time on the lam nothing but a stop-gap — a period where they can catch their breath and think of some means of resolving their problem. They don't seek permanent asylum and they're not looking to start life anew; all they need is time to formulate a plan. Usually, it means striking back at their pursuers... permanently if possible. (Tombstones have a very reassuring sense of finality.)

It's difficult if the pursuers are the authorities, however. If a cop dies, he's replaced by another, and another, and so on until the fugitive is brought in. The law enforcement system is far too large for any individual or group of individuals to dent. (Escape to the Borderlands is far preferable, since the U.C.

police have no jurisdiction there.) Turning the tables works far better if the pursuer is an individual — hopefully a vulnerable one — rather than an institution.

Furthermore, the act of fleeing takes a toll on one's resources, making it more difficult to strike back even if an opportunity presents itself. Fugitives with this goal in mind are searching for an ideal set of circumstances to confront their pursuers: the right place, the right time, the right moment when the odds favor them. In this case, the flight becomes an extended chess match, played out over the course of the campaign until one side or the other is defeated.

Then there are those who have been wrongly accused of a crime, either by the police or by some other organization with the power to punish the scapegoat. Such figures can end their flight by clearing their names: by solving the case themselves or finding another scapegoat on whom to pin the blame. Either way, the fugitive's purpose is clear. He must assemble evidence in support of his case, possibly retracing steps which the police have already taken. He must find the crime's true culprit (who likely has no interest in being fingered) or set a pigeon up to take the fall (who will be hard to pin if he didn't do it). And when he finally has the proof he needs, the fugitive must approach his pursuers in some manner that doesn't get him killed. Such characters are often highly motivated, however, and can prove much more difficult to catch than those drifting aimlessly towards some nebulous concept of safety.

Regardless of how the chase comes to an end, it should serve as the climax to the fugitive's plight, and even define it to a certain extent. Even the longest chase must someday end; the fugitive's actions play just as much a part as the pursuers in determining how and when that happens.



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## FUGITIVE PLAYER CHARACTERS

Because of their mercurial nature and specifically defined characteristics, fugitive player characters can present a challenge to groups who aren't prepared for them. The following section is intended to help facilitate fugitive-based scenarios, and include fugitive characters within a larger party or campaign.

Individual scenarios involving fugitive PCs are actually quite easy, and indeed have been a staple of role-playing in every conceivable genre. The characters are wrongly accused of a crime or set upon by a more powerful enemy, and must flee in order to hold onto life and limb. Or they are tasked to track down someone who has gone missing, playing the role of pursuer in the story. As a limited excursion, a fugitive story can be run with little or no difficulty.

The trouble arises in trying to run an entire campaign on the lam, or worse: in adding a fugitive PC to a party set in a single locale.

### Fugitives in Mixed Parties

Fugitive characters in mixed parties are actually quite easy to handle... provided they have a little stability in their lives. Fugitive characters freshly on the run are often too preoccupied with escape to be much use with anything else. The constant process of drifting and moving on makes it difficult to bond with a permanent group. Obviously, belonging to the Few helps establish ties, but any fugitive who consistently works with the same people has established a level of stability in his life. This likely entails a new job, a new identity, and the like. The secrets he's fleeing from are no longer a day-to-day occurrence — which frees the character up to participate in any type of scenario the GM wishes.

Similarly, when the past comes calling and the character's fugitive status is brought to the forefront of the campaign, the party can engage in it without derailing the other characters' backgrounds. The theme of pursuit can be used as a recurring element, rather than the central focus: blending in with the other threads of the campaign. The fugitive must periodically deal with unpleasant reminders of his status — with the likely aid of the other PCs — and yet need not make that the sole focus of his or her life. The conclusion of his character arc — the confrontation with his pursuers — makes an excellent scenario for late in the campaign, and can easily involve the rest of the party as well.



Naturally, a fugitive who has built a life while hiding from his past has likely lied to those close to him, which could create some strong role-playing possibilities. How will the other PCs react to knowledge of who he really is and what he's done? Will it endanger them? Will it cause conflicts (as it would if one of the other PCs is a cop and the fugitive is wanted by the law)? How much will the fugitive reveal, and how much of what he tells them can be believed? The timing of such questions in the campaign — especially if the party has been through a number of scenarios under false pretenses — can have a dramatic and exciting effect on the entire party.

It also requires consideration at the beginning of the campaign: the player will essentially present a false front to his fellows while deliberately hiding a secret — worked out between he and the GM before the campaign begins — that will someday come back to haunt him. Such deceptions are an integral part of *The Edge of Midnight* (see the core rulebook, page 151), though as always, they should enhance everyone's enjoyment, and not deceive other players solely for deception's sake.

## THE FUGITIVE CAMPAIGN

An entire campaign centered around a fugitive is easy enough to construct. As discussed earlier, the story arc has a natural progression: the campaign starts with the fugitive going on the lam, and ends when he's recaptured, clears himself, reaches whatever permanent refuge he's seeking, or otherwise ends his flight. Individual scenarios can focus on evading pursuit, achieving one aspect of the fugitive's long-term goals, or incidental adventures along the way (unrelated to the chase but still involving the fugitive). The only shortcoming of such a campaign is that it works best as a solo endeavor, with one or at most two characters on the run. The camaraderie gained by a larger group can often destroy the sense of persecution and detachment necessary for such a campaign to succeed. Role-players are used to depending on each other; a group of them on the run, while interesting for the odd scenario or two, will likely become quite stale during the course of a fugitive campaign. Generally speaking, the fewer characters on the lam, the longer the campaign can run without growing old.

A fugitive campaign in which the PCs are the pursuers is possible as well, though it is much more difficult to pull off. The constant focus on a singular goal can grow monotonous very quickly, and without more diversity in the campaign, it should be kept mercifully brief. Pursuits can be interspersed with other scenario ideas; the party loses track of its quarry and turns to other matters, only to pick up the trail again when the fugitive reappears in some far-flung locale. These scenarios work best as one-shots, allowing the characters to track a fugitive over the course of a few evenings of gaming rather than an entire campaign. If you wish to extend it longer than that, you should be prepared to either keep the campaign brief, or to intersperse the hunt with other scenarios to keep the players from growing complacent.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES

### PRISONERS

For most criminal characters, prison means the end of the campaign. Their dark deeds have finally caught up with them, and the wheels of justice have ground them to dust. Locked in a 10' x 10' cell, stripped of their freedom and privileges, there's nothing left but to carve notches in the wall and regret the mistakes that landed them here. An enterprising GM, however, need not let the campaign conclude with incarceration. A stint in prison certainly marks a fundamental shift in a campaign's focus, but it needn't spell the end.

Not if the characters are tough enough, that is.

### GUILTY! TRIALS AND CONVICTIONS

Prison life begins with the character's arrest and trial, which forms the logical beginning to any story set behind bars. The police have built a case against their suspect, arrested him, booked him, and charged him with the crime in question. The next step is to see if they can make it stick. This section discusses the particulars of running a criminal trial as a scenario.

The Unified Commonwealth, like the United States, has clearly-defined laws regarding the rights of citizens during criminal procedures. Individuals may not be held longer than 48 hours without being charged, are not subject to unreasonable search and seizure, and are assumed innocent until proven guilty. The police accordingly act with caution, slowly compiling a case, obtaining the proper search warrants and going through the necessary procedures before arresting a suspect. Having said that, some police help grease the wheels through coercion, intimidation, and outright torture. The suspect's only real chance to defend himself — and the last best chance to avert a prison sentence — is during a trial.

Following an arrest, the suspect is booked, fingerprinted and photographed, and then held in the local jail. He is taken before a judge at the *arraignment hearing*, and the judge sets bail (money which the defendant gives the court to guarantee he won't flee before trial; bail is returned once the trial starts). A trial date is set and the suspect — now the defendant — is either released on his own recognizance or held until his trial begins.

#### Legal Defense

The defendant has three options when deciding upon his defense: he can hire a lawyer, he can be represented by a public defender for free, or he may choose to defend himself. Note that in the Unified Commonwealth, some defendants do not have access to a public defender, and must prepare their own defense. This is because individual provinces and cities have the right to decide whether the case merits a public defense. Financial constraints on most cities mean that such instances are uncommon; a defendant only gets a public defender when the case is in some doubt or the infraction is relatively minor (i.e., anything less than murder, rape, or the like). Otherwise, he must either pay for a lawyer (and there's certainly no shortage of low-rent shysters willing to defend someone for peanuts) or conduct the defense himself.

(In the real world, the issue of public defense was a matter of some controversy, argued in several cases before the Supreme Court. In *Betts vs. Brady* (1942), the Court ruled that, while all defendants were entitled to a lawyer, the question of whether a case *required* one was left up to the states... which, in some locales, created a situation similar to the kind found in the U.C. It wasn't until *Gideon vs. Wainwright* (1963) that the Court finally ruled that the Sixth Amendment guaranteed all accused citizens the right to legal counsel, regardless of circumstances. Such a ruling is a long way off in the world of *The Edge of Midnight*.)

If the defense wishes to avoid a trial, there are several options available. They may enter a *plea bargain* — an agreement reached between the prosecution and the defense whereby the defendant pleads guilty to one charge in exchange for having other charges dropped or a lenient sentence passed. They may also plead *no contest*, in which case the defendant accepts the punishment without formally acknowledging his or her guilt. (Defendants enter this plea if they don't wish to have an admission of guilt on their record.) And of course, they may simply plead guilty and throw themselves on the mercy of the court. Normally, only pleas of not guilty ever go to trial.

#### Trial Procedure

With a trial date set, and the defendant reasonably sure of his representation, the two sides begin preparing their respective cases, which will be decided in court by a jury. The exact procedure of a criminal trial is outlined below:

- 1) **The selection of a jury begins.** The prosecution and defense question jurors to determine their suitability (ostensibly to find objective members, but often seeking those biased towards one side or the other). Each side may challenge prospective jurors, asking the judge to dismiss them because of obvious or unfavorable bias. In addition, each side may exercise a *peremptory challenge* to dismiss a jurist for any reason whatsoever (the number of peremptory challenges for each side is limited to four or six, depending upon what province they are in). The entire process of questioning is referred to as *voir dire*.
- 2) **Evidence issues.** Before the trial begins, both sides request to admit or exclude specific pieces of evidence. Such requests are called motions *in limine*, and may be used to bar a particularly touchy piece of evidence before it reaches trial.
- 3) **Opening arguments.** The prosecution makes a brief outline of the case against the defendant; the defense then follows with an outline of its case supporting the defendant.
- 4) **The prosecution's case.** The prosecution makes its case by calling witnesses and submitting evidence. The defense may cross-examine any witnesses, challenging their testimony in hopes of undermining what they say. The prosecution may redirect its witnesses in response to any cross examinations.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

- 5) **Motion to dismiss.** The defense may make a motion to dismiss the case once the prosecution has rested.
- 6) **The defense's case.** If the motion to dismiss is not granted, then the defense presents its case, following the same procedure as the prosecution did. The prosecution may cross-examine witnesses as the defense did earlier, and the defense may redirect accordingly.
- 7) **Rebuttal.** The prosecution may offer rebuttal to refute the defense's case if it wishes.
- 8) **Closing arguments.** The prosecution makes its closing arguments; then defense follows with its own closing arguments.
- 9) **Deliberation and decision.** The jury deliberates — usually after being given instructions on the specific nuances of the law from the judge — and then renders a verdict of guilty or not guilty. Both verdicts require unanimous decisions by the jury. A *hung jury* occurs when the jury cannot reach a unanimous verdict, resulting in a *mistrial* which ends the proceedings. Mistrials usually result in a new trial with a new jury, unless both sides reach a plea bargain or the prosecutor dismisses the case.
- 10) **Judgment.** The judge pronounces sentence on the defendant, if guilty.

## Role-Playing a Trial

Trials in a role-playing environment are marked almost entirely by character development. The procedure itself is largely verbal, as witnesses are questioned and cross-examined, evidence is weighed, and opening and closing statements are delivered. Though the process can be rendered with a few die rolls, the more it can be done through fluid role-playing, the better.

The GM should have the circumstances of the case clearly in mind before the trial begins: who actually committed the crime, what evidence was left behind, and what the prosecution and defense will present. He should also understand where the player characters enter into the equation, what kind of impact they will have on the proceedings, and how much they understand about the case itself. Their role in the trial (defendants, attorneys, investigators, witnesses, even judges) will influence everything.

In gaming terms, a trial can be divided into two sections: investigation and presentation. *Investigation* involves going over the evidence, searching for new clues, and helping to build the case through forensic details. In many ways, it's framed like a more traditional mystery — the characters must uncover the details that will exonerate (or convict) the defendant, retracing the steps of the crime and perhaps learning whether their opponents' case is based on the truth or not. It can even become dangerous should evidence of a cover-up or a wrongful accusation come to light. After all, if the police have the wrong man, then the real culprit will go to great lengths to remain in the clear...



## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES

Once all the evidence has been gathered, it is *presented* at the trial itself. This is almost a pure role-playing experience as the attorneys make their case and question witnesses. If one of the characters is either the prosecutor or the defense attorney, then he or she can direct the course of the trial: calling witnesses, arranging the evidence and so forth. Though it can be facilitated with a few Brain + Lore (Law) rolls (or perhaps a few Moxie + Fast Talk rolls), the GM should encourage such exchanges to be acted out as much as possible. Have the attorney character prepare an opening statement and read it in front of the group. Play out the exchange with a hostile witness, allowing the PC to challenge his assertions (or, if the PC himself is the witness, to bark back at the questioning attorney). Like any social exchange in an RPG, they're most effective when actually being played out in character, rather than just limited to die rolls (though naturally, die rolls should still be a determinant, especially if you have a wallflower player portraying a hot-shot D.A.).

Similarly, trials have their own pace and cadence, which should be played up for maximum effect whenever possible. Emphasize the key moments — the surprise witness, the dramatic closing statement, the piece of evidence which undoes the other side's case — and structure the proceedings to give them maximum impact. Don't dwell excessively on legal minutia or long-expected developments. Structure it as you would any other scenario: a slow build-up to a climactic moment, followed by a denouement as the jury deliberates and a verdict is rendered.

Trials rarely take up more than a single scenario, and most are much shorter — sometimes no more than a scene or two. Their role usually comes in connection to a larger mystery or as the beginning to a longer prison campaign.

### LIFE IN THE BIG HOUSE

If the trial ends in a guilty verdict, the real trouble begins: the defendant finds himself packed off to prison, there to serve his sentence or (in particularly grim cases) to await his execution. The penitentiary becomes his entire world; the universe may as well end at the edge of its towering gray walls. Within that universe, however, there are opportunities to survive, advance, and even thrive. There are friends and foes, obstacles to overcome, schemes and power plays, and — if you're very lucky — a few chances to make an escape.

In the *Edge of Midnight* universe, prisons are divided into three basic categories. *District prisons*, governed by whichever nationally defined political district they occupy, house all those convicted of local crimes (i.e., crimes which do not involve the national government). A director of corrections, appointed by the district's representatives in the National Legislature, oversees all the prisons in his jurisdiction. He appoints wardens, approves policy changes, and has the power to grant pardons and stays of execution. Specific criminal codes vary from district to district, and define what constitutes a jail-able offence, but most follow the usual cocktail of murder and mayhem: armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, manslaughter, trafficking stolen goods, and so forth.

*National prisons* are governed by the national government as a whole, rather than by the representatives of a single district. They encompass prisoners convicted of a national-level crime, as well as those who beat district raps and were re-indicted by higher authorities. National prisons tend to be cleaner and more disciplined than district prisons, and prisoners here invariably serve out longer sentences. The list of prisoners here includes organized criminals, kidnappers who cross district boundaries, counterfeiters and tax cheats, and those convicted of sedition against the Unified Commonwealth. Warlocks are also sent here (since practicing magic is a national offence), though warlocks who use magic in relation to a lesser crime are often left in district prisons.

*City jails* ostensibly only serve to incarcerate individuals waiting for trial. Once a criminal is convicted, he's usually packed off to a district or national prison. However, the sheer number of criminals arrested in the U.C. has created overcrowding in many prisons, and city jails have sometimes been used to pick up the slack. It's not unusual for simple drunk tanks to hold hardened felons, kept there for years while waiting for a spot to open up in the district pens.

Beyond that, all penitentiaries in the U.C. fall into one of three security designations:

- 1) **Minimum security prisons** are really more like work camps than formal pens. They consist of dorms and bunkhouses, usually separated by barbed wire fences. Though they have the features of most other prisons, the atmosphere is less harsh. Many so-called "white collar" criminals end up in minimum security camps, where they perform community service or work on public projects until their release. These facilities usually house several hundred prisoners at any given time.
- 2) **Medium security prisons**, or so-called "gladiator schools," often house young or first-time offenders. The buildings consist of cell blocks composed of concrete or stone, workshops for some form of industry, and separate areas for the administration. Guard towers and high fences topped by barbed wire form the bulk of security; there are rarely any walls. Cell blocks are organized according to prisoner behavior. Model prisoners receive better treatment and more privileges, while problematic prisoners are kept in more spartan cell blocks. Prisoners with recurring disciplinary problems are sent to maximum security facilities. These prisons hold anywhere from 500 to 3,000 prisoners.
- 3) **Maximum security prisons** house multiple felons and those convicted of serious offences. They're imposing stone edifices, topped by high walls and manned by guard towers at regular intervals. Prisoners are housed in massive cell blocks several stories tall, built to hold thousands of prisoners at a time. Conditions in maximum security prisons are quite harsh, and extreme steps are taken to prevent any escapes. The walls usually extend deep underground.



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

to prevent tunneling, and dogs are often kept on hand to track escapees. Brutality, both from the guards and from other prisoners, is common, and punishments such as solitary confinement ("the hole") can have a devastating effect on a prisoner's psyche

## Transporting Prisoners

Prisoners are transported to the pen (or transferred between pens) almost exclusively by bus. A few select cases involve trains or planes, but buses remain the most reliable means of moving convicts safely. Prison buses are capable of holding 20-40 passengers, often bound in shackles to the seat or floor. The doors and windows are secured by iron bars, and "gun cages" at the front and rear of the bus prevent the prisoners from moving out of the passenger area. Each bus is manned by three guards: one driver and two men manning the respective cages. Every guard carries a sidearm and the keys to every prisoner's locks; those in the cages are armed with pump action shotguns as well. Because prison transfers are the easiest time to execute a breakout, the guards are always on their toes, trained to watch for the slightest sign of danger. There are no stops for food or rest; some buses have toilets installed, but the cons must use them while their hands and feet are still manacled. On other runs, there are no facilities, and the unfortunate con just gets to hold it until the ride is over.

Gunmetal Island prison in Gateway has a private plane which they charter for incoming prisoners. (Their infamous warlock wing demands special transportation requirements, and a warlock prisoner willing to tear his way out of a bus may be less inclined to do so at 20,000 feet.) The plane also transports ordinary prisoners, shackled in much the same way as they would be on buses. The flight schedule constantly changes, and the plane uses a rotating series of refueling stops to help minimize the chance of a break-out while on the ground. The charter flights have met with some success and the national government is exploring the possibility of adding more flights for other prisons — though the cost is still too prohibitive to seriously consider.

## Routines and Schedules

Newly arrived prisoners are divested of their goods (which are catalogued and returned to them upon release), then showered and covered with de-lousing powder. They are issued a uniform and bed kit, and sent to their cells, where the reality of their condition hits home. From the moment he arrives, a new prisoner is wrapped up tight by rigorous routine. He's told when to sleep and when to eat, how long his showers last and whether or not he can use the bathroom. He's directed where to go, what to do, and how to speak. Discipline is harsh and punishments common — both from the guards and from fellow inmates. Gradually, the routine becomes part of an inmate's soul and he rarely rids himself of it, even years after being released.

The following represents a typical daily schedule for most U.C. convicts: the rigid structure that defines their lives. The exact schedule varies from prison to prison, but only slightly in most cases.

**6 a.m. — Wake-up call.** Prisoners are awakened by the harsh bray of the prison bell and the lights in their cell turning on. They usually have about two hours to get dressed and perform their morning toilet, and must sit in their cells until breakfast is ready.

**8 a.m. — Head count/breakfast.** At eight o'clock, the cell doors slide open and the inmates are expected to stand in a line just outside of them. This allows the guards to perform a head count and see if anyone is sick or has effected an escape. The process is long and dull, usually taking about half an hour. Once the count is complete, another buzzer rings and the prisoners are led to breakfast. Prisoners are fed in a large communal cafeteria; the meal usually consists of military surplus food and industrial cast-offs like powdered eggs. If the convict is lucky, he can use this time to take a shower as well (showers are open sixteen hours a day to help regulate overflow; guards are not posted inside bathhouse, which is why stabbings and other incidents often take place there).

**9 a.m. — Work detail.** The prison bell sounds on the hour and the cons are taken from the breakfast hall. They then have ten minutes to get to their assigned work detail, where they are counted again. Work detail varies from prison to prison and inmate to inmate. Some prisons have subsidiary industries attached to them, like the classic license plate factory or sweatshops which assemble mail carrier bags. About twenty percent of the convicts work in such facilities. Another fifteen percent are employed in the prison itself — working the cafeteria, sweeping and mopping floors, performing maintenance duties, or engaged in groundskeeping. Education programs are available to a precious few prisoners (maybe ten percent of the population). The others are either in the hole, on medical leave, or stuck back in their cells to count the bricks on the walls.

With a few exceptions, all work facilities are enclosed within the prison, affording no opportunities to escape. Extremely lucky prisoners are furloughed to outside work programs, where they are chained together in gangs of ten or twenty to build highways, repair damage from natural disasters, and the like. Guards keep such prisoners under close scrutiny during work period, and potential escapees are usually shot on sight.

Work constitutes a privilege in prison, not a right. Inmates don't need money to purchase essentials or pay rent. Instead, work provides an outlet for their energy or a way to stave off excruciating boredom. Most cons consider themselves lucky to land a work detail; it beats endless hours alone in the cell. However, convicts rarely get paid for their work; if they do, it's no more than a dollar or so per week. (They can use this money to purchase luxury items like tissue or crackers in the prison commissary, or receive it as a lump sum upon their release.) The waiting list for a new job is often quite long, and desperate cons have been known to knife each other if they think it will increase their chances of landing a position.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES

**Noon — Head count/lunch.** At noon, the guards and work supervisors take another head count, and then the bell rings again, sending the cons back to the cafeteria for lunch. Those on outside work details will often eat where they work, given a few precious minutes to relax and have a seat. Some prisons also allow convicts to spend this time in the exercise yard.

**1 p.m. — Return to cells/work detail.** The bell rings again and the cons shuffle back to their cells or designated work area. Here they remain for the next four hours, uninterrupted save for the occasional bathroom break.

**5 p.m. — Exercise in the yard.** With the work day over, another head count comes, and then the cons are given a precious hour in the prison's exercise yard. Here, groups get together to share information, deal in contraband, work out, or even engage in a few pick-up games of baseball. Most of the time, they just walk to stretch their legs, or catch up on the latest scuttlebutt. Violence, of course, is always an option if the circumstances are right.

**6 p.m. — Dinner.** The bell rings, sending the cons back to the cafeteria to dinner.

**7 p.m. — Return to cells.** Dinner ends and the cons are returned to their cells for the evening.

**8 p.m. — Head count.** The guards take another head count by walking along the cell block and noting the cons in their cells.

**10 p.m. — Lights out.** The lights are shut down and the cons are expected to be in their beds. A few stay up, but without light, there is little to do but stare at the darkened wall. Cons in bed are expected to keep a head, arm, or other piece of bare skin above the covers, so the guards can easily spot them throughout the night.

**Midnight — Head count.** The guards check on the prisoners, performing a head count as before.

**4 a.m. — Head count.** The guards check on the prisoners one final time before the lights come on at 6 a.m.



### EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Most of the role-playing opportunities in prison come in the spaces between these rigorous markers: the whispers in the yard, the fights in the showers, the deals made to smuggle those cigars past the guards. Here is where a prison setting really comes alive, and where imprisoned characters face challenges as engaging as any in the outside world.

#### Politics

Prison engenders its own form of Machiavellian politics, where power is a premium and the rules which govern outside society are nonexistent. Inmates must survive in an environment where they have no rights, where violence and abuse are routine, and where long hours of boredom are rife with potential conflict. Slightings and insults can balloon into lasting grudges as the offended con stewes upon what was said and done, while perceived favoritism or extra privileges can spawn lethal resentments. Conflict is also a form of resistance — it shows the world that they're not totally beaten yet, and that they will fight back if pushed too hard. In such an environment, those who display any signs of weakness are open for attack. The law of the jungle dominates.

In that light, prison society becomes a perfect breeding ground for the most bare-knuckle politics known to man. Cons compete with each other for easy work details, for spots in the chow line, and for treasured possessions. They create enemies and form alliances aimed at bettering themselves in the pecking order. When attacked, they retaliate; those who don't risk being perceived as weak, reducing their life to an endless nightmare of exploitation and bullying. Cons must learn to get along with each other, but at the same time must fiercely defend what they perceive as theirs. The political games never end in prison; those who thrive are allowed retain some small measure of creature comforts and perhaps even a modicum of human dignity.

Politics in prison is much the same as it is in more civilized forums; it simply lacks any precepts of morality, existing in the realm of pure Darwinism. Benevolence doesn't exist, though a strongman's underlings and allies will likely be rewarded. Everyone acts out of self interest, favors must be returned in kind, and power is only retained as long as it can be defended. At the same time, a strange code of etiquette arises; cons often take great pains to avoid insulting or offending someone unnecessarily. Perceived toughness is lauded, and "honorable" cons are afforded the respect of their peers. Smart cons mind their own business and stay out of everyone's way, but even that will generate enmity, and may require a few new allies. One way or another, every convict in prison is playing the political game with his fellows. His survival quite literally depends on it.

#### Contraband and Illicit Trade

Prisons have their own economies — self-contained and limited, but thriving nonetheless. Drugs, alcohol, illegal foodstuffs, and even weapons are smuggled in by visitors or staff members, and then traded throughout the prisoner community.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Those who control the flow of illicit items hold a great deal of power in the prison yard, and can often bargain for favors in exchange for a coveted item.

Tobacco is often the currency of choice within prison walls. It's easily transportable, usable on a moment's notice, and generally permissible from the guards' standpoint. Prisoners trade cigars and cigarettes for food, chewing gum, and other small luxuries. More exotic materials, however, require cash: either straight bills or deposits made by outsiders into bank accounts. Drugs and alcohol can sell for a considerable markup in prison and outside forces can make a huge profit on the illicit trade inside. Most of them require a little more than just a packet of smokes in payment, however.

Obtaining contraband is fairly easy on the outside; with the exception of drugs, most are available at any market or general store. But smuggling it in requires some finesse; if the guards uncover it, the prisoner will be written up and punished. The most common smuggling method involves visitors passing it to the con surreptitiously in the visiting room. Some prisons separate visitors through screens and glass doors to prevent such transfers. Other prisoners will enlist the help of outside staff, smuggling the goods in with shipments of regular supplies. Guards can be bribed to bring in items as well (though it often gives them leverage over the prisoner since they now know what he's carrying).

Such a network, once established, becomes a regular hub of trade; the more a prisoner can bring in, the more he profits and the more influence he has with the other prisoners. The best "merchants" in the stir have well-established means of getting what they require and can shift to alternate sources if one is compromised or dries up. Once the contraband is inside the prison walls, the prisoner must concern himself with holding onto it. He must secret it away in a secure location, where the guards won't find it and other prisoners won't take it (though guards rarely kick up a fuss for modest items like food or smokes). Some prisons have lockers where the inmates keep personal possessions; other places require more creative thinking. Hollowed-out bricks, mattresses, and the areas behind steam pipes all make good hiding places, as do secretive areas near the con's work detail. Once he's secured it, he needs to find a buyer... which shouldn't be a problem so long as the con keeps his inquiries quiet. Many items of contraband are consumable, guaranteeing both an easy means of disposal if necessary, and plenty of return customers in the future.

Naturally, access to contraband is fiercely contested; control of such resources is a form of power, and rival "merchants" will go to great lengths to protect their connections to the outside. Gangs of convicts representing outside criminal organizations will seek to monopolize the trade in drugs and other contraband, just as they would on the streets. The competition often leads to acts of intimidation and violence as rivals seek to defend their "turf."

Similarly, contraband can be a testing point for unproven convicts, as other prisoners try to claim a new fish's possessions for themselves. If he doesn't thwart their challenge, he won't survive long; the pecking order of many prisoners can be determined by who has the most contraband, and how well they can defend their belongings from attack.

## Gambling

With any kind of currency comes the desire to bet it all away. While card games are sometimes allowed in prison, playing for stakes is strictly forbidden. Nevertheless, many prisons have flourishing poker matches, played for cigarettes or other forms of contraband. An even bigger practice is sports betting — a passion among the incarcerated and the cause of as much violence as drugs or alcohol. Prisoners will bet on ball games (especially important games like the CL Series), horse races, and championship prize fights. Prisons will often run radio broadcasts of such events live through the speakers, allowing the entire populace to listen in.

Tension during broadcasts is unbearably high, as the outcome of the game exacerbates the already stressful prison environment with its inbred team loyalties, betting interests, and the passions of the moment. Vineland Prison north of New Eden witnesses a few new fatalities every baseball season, as inmate fans of the New Eden Grays and their crosstown rivals the Brenton Haporth vent their frustrations at each other. One memorable CL Series five years ago — between the Grays and the New Eden Gallants — sparked a riot which lasted nearly four days. But despite that, most prisons continue to allow broadcasts of important events. Doing so merely raises the *possibility* of trouble; denying prisoners access to the game will guarantee it.

Gambling debts are serious business in prison, even more so than on the streets outside. Welshers and those unable to pay are often targeted for violence; beatings and killings increase exponentially after matches, when losing gamblers have to face the music. Even low-key inmates will often wager a few cigarettes on a game, out of sheer boredom if nothing else. The high rollers actually maintain outside bank accounts, where free friends of the losers can send the funds. Illegal trade dominates the prison economy, but gambling is almost as lucrative, and just as hard to resist.

## Fun with the Guards:

### Punishments and Rewards

Every prisoner is beholden to the guards on duty, and required to obey their orders at all times. Most of the time, guards are just punching a clock; they want to get through their shift as quietly as possible, and act only when trouble rears its head. They tend to come down harder on those with a history of acting out, using their authority and an elaborate system of rewards and punishments to keep the cons in line. The cons vastly outnumber the guards in every prison, meaning that offences or perceived rebellion must be snuffed out immediately.

Guards routinely toss cells looking for contraband and similar forbidden items. Ostensibly it serves to keep the prison free of illegal items, but it also serves as a tool for control. Prisoners have very little privacy, and searches from the guards violate every facet of it. They enter the cell — sometimes while the inmate is away — and root through every corner, tossing the inmate's meager possessions out into the hall. Objects may be seized for no reason and never returned; if contraband is found, further punishment may be instigated, such as a loss

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES

### A BRIEF WORD ON THE SHIV

Shivs (also called “shanks”) are makeshift weapons which prisoners build out of innocuous objects. A shiv can be made out of metal, wood, or any hard material. Some are built surreptitiously in a prison’s wood or metal shop; others are constructed out of toothbrushes or razor blades. Inmates can even make a shiv by tightly rolling a newspaper or magazine, then hardening it with toothpaste. Stats for shivs can be found on page 35 of the core rulebook, and page 175 of this rulebook. Most of them break fairly easily, but can be rebuilt just as easily. Other prison weapons include pillowcases filled with heavy objects such as books or soda bottles (considered clubs), rolls of nickels used like brass knuckles, and even primitive zip guns built out of lengths of pipe. Stats for all of these can be found on page 175.

Weapons of any sort are strictly forbidden in prison... and they’re not the sort of things the guards can look the other way on. Anything which can be jabbed into a fellow prisoner can also be jabbed into a guard, and even those on the take will react harshly when they find one. Prisoners caught with shivs are usually sent to the hole for at least a week; harsher guards will often rough them up on the way there. Recurring problems will result in extended stays in solitary, or possibly a transfer to a higher-security prison. But despite the risk, many prisoners insist on keeping weapons, either hidden on their person or concealed within easy reach in their cell. Solitary confinement is tough, but being killed without a means of fighting back is worse.

of library privileges or time in the hole. How and when the guards choose to toss cells — and whose cells they choose to toss — is a subtle form of control in itself. Troublemakers find their living quarters searched on a regular basis, while model prisoners are roused less frequently, and often allowed to keep any minor contraband uncovered.

Prisoner beatings are a more direct form of coercion: though officially disparaged, they take place with appalling regularity. Public beatings occur only when the guards need to make an example of someone (and are sure they won’t cause a riot); more often, prisoners are taken when they’re alone and less able to fight back. In every case, the prisoner is informed of just why the beating is taking place, in hopes of correcting the aberrant behavior.

Finally, there’s the infamous “hole,” or solitary confinement. Prisoners who violate the rules will be stripped of their uniforms and tossed into a windowless cell for a marked period of time. If they’re lucky, they have a single light by which to see; more often they’re kept entirely in the dark. There they remain for periods ranging from a few days to a month or more, left only with their own thoughts as company. Food arrives through a slot in the door three times a day; that’s often the only means a prisoner has of telling time. Otherwise, they can do nothing but count the bricks, befriend the vermin, or talk to

themselves. Long stints in the hole are marked by borderline delusions, lengthy monologues delivered to no one, and outright hallucinations. Most cons will do anything to avoid it.

The guards and prison administrators are free to deliver any punishment they see fit with near-impunity. Oversight committees occasionally hand down rebukes for behavior that crosses the line, but they are few and far between, and only come about when prisoners or others complain. The guards remember those who turn on them, and they always have the edge when it comes to dispensing payback. Convicts who inform on abusive keepers often find themselves constant targets of punishment and humiliation.

Having said that, it is possible to curry a mutually beneficial relationship with the guards. Though hard-nosed hacks will always be a problem, most guards simply want the prisoners quiet and orderly, and a few will even go out of their way to lend a hand. They’ll let harmless contraband slide, arrange for special privileges, or just look the other way when the prisoner needs them gone. Of course, such favors never come free. Guards expect those they help to make their jobs as easy as possible, and often demand much more as well: information on other prisoners, for example, or flat-out bribes. Indeed, bribery is one of the easiest inroads to the guards’ favor, because their salaries are very low and a few hundred dollars can make a huge difference. Prisoners must always guard themselves against growing too close to the guards, however; no matter how much their favor might ease life behind bars, the other cons are always watching, and they have little mercy for those who conspire with the “enemy.”

### Fights, Assaults, and Riots

The stress of prison life is unbearable. Tension among the inmates, threats from guards or higher-ups, and year after year cooped up in the same enclosed place takes its toll. Violence is an inescapable reality in prison, as much a part of life as the bars and the walls. When it comes, even the meekest inmate had better be prepared.

Sometimes, an attack is pre-planned, as when a con plots to harm or do away with an enemy. Such attacks are often worked out well in advance, and conducted so that no one can identify the assailant (killing another inmate can tack a life sentence onto the time you’re currently serving, while killing a guard makes you eligible for the death penalty). They always take place in secluded areas away from people, or somewhere where the target’s friends can’t come to his aid. And they invariably serve some larger purpose, even if it’s only to teach the target his place in the prison hierarchy.

Pre-planned attacks are more the exception than the rule, however. More often, violence explodes spontaneously, as a convict pushed to the brink suddenly releases all of his pent-up hostility. Attacks can come for any reason — someone looked at him funny, his parole hearing was deferred, the cafeteria was serving Jell-o that day, etc. — and often foster grudges that last for years afterwards. Fights are rarely lethal (though they may involve lethal objects), but they often cement the participants’ reputation among other cons. Those who acquit themselves well are afforded more respect, while those bested quickly are marked as weak.



## GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Fights also incur a lot of noise. Nearby cons will quickly cluster around a disturbance, shouting and yelling at the top of their lungs. Those in nearby cells will bang cups and dishware against the bars, while others will fling dirty water (or worse) upon the combatants. Because such disturbances can escalate, guards will move quickly to quell them, instituting prison-wide lockdowns and threatening to remove privileges for the entire block.

Occasionally, cons will engage in arranged fights for entertainment purposes. Combatants will meet in a makeshift boxing ring, with an audience gathered under the careful eye of the guards. Provincial prison systems often have their own boxing leagues, and rival gangs will sometimes pit their respective “champions” against each other for bragging rights. Ostensibly, such matches follow strict rules, though dirty tricks are hardly unusual. Prison administrators aren’t thrilled with the fights, but it lets the cons blow off steam, providing a controllable outlet for otherwise dangerous aggressions. Betting on sanctioned prison fights is often heavier than sporting events outside the prison walls.

Almost every fight in prison entails cons vs. cons. Inmates have few options when it comes to resisting the guards, who can make their lives miserable in an endless variety of ways. Striking a guard can lead to extended sentences, as a new assault charge is laid on one’s previous conviction. If you actually wound a guard, his colleagues will be sure to exact a nasty revenge, for their authority must be maintained, even if the wounded guard was disliked or had few friends. The main weapon of resistance against the authorities is the passive variety. Work strikes can prevent the prison from functioning properly (maintenance and janitorial duties are almost always filled by cons), though unless it takes place on a large scale, the warden will simply “fire” the convict and replace him with another one. Hunger strikes can be somewhat more effective, especially if the press gets word of it. Other forms of passive resistance include “slow playing” (obeying orders from

the guards in a deliberately lackadaisical fashion), ignoring orders, or filing lawsuits against the prison. Anything which paints the authorities in a bad light — a negative news story, an official protest lodge in court, and the like — can be used to fight back without directly attacking the guards.

The most dangerous form of prison violence by far is a riot, involving large numbers of cons in open revolt. Riots are inevitable in the U.C.’s prison system (no matter what steps are taken to curtail them) and every one is extremely dangerous. Some of them begin when gang tussles get out of hand. Others



## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES

are spontaneous acts of rebellion by the prison community, sparked by incidental conditions such as a random beating or a lack of air conditioning. Seasoned cons can sense a riot coming, and even new fish can feel when conditions are ripe for an uprising. When it comes, there's little to do but ride the wave: thrash the guards, overwhelm the security measures, and try to seize as much of the prison as possible.

No riot in the history of the U.C. prison system has ever succeeded. The authorities will go to any lengths to restore order and while prisoners may seize an entire facility, they usually have little means of escape. Police and army units will be called in once the violence gets past a certain stage, maintaining a strict perimeter until they can retake the prison by force. Riots are usually more concerned with payback — a demonstration of what little power the inmates have, lest their jailers grow too complacent. Inevitably, however, the prison is retaken, and the rioters are punished severely for their would-be revolt. Lengthened sentences are standard punishments, and prisoners who kill guards in the riot are often eligible for the death penalty — to say nothing of the months and years surviving guards have to avenge themselves upon the prisoners in their care...

That being said, prisoners can still cause a great deal of damage during a riot. Furniture will be overturned and destroyed, gates and doors wrenched off their hinges, and even concrete walls subjected to damage. Rioting prisoners can set a surprising number of things on fire, from their own mattresses to the wooden shingles of the roofs. They will often use chemical cleaning products as fire starters, which also serve as crude Molotov cocktails during the authorities' inevitable attempt to retake the prison. Conditions in the areas the inmates have seized is appalling, even for a prison — with hostages subjected to tortures and executions of the most savage kind. Organized inmate leaders can rarely control such violence; they can only hope to steer it in less destructive directions. Hostages seized from the guards and civilian workers are the only bargaining chips prisoners have; killing them lowers their chances of surviving the ordeal.

### Escape

Every con wants freedom. Not a day goes by when they don't think about life on the outside, and what they would do there if they weren't stuck behind bars. Most of them spend long hours fantasizing about ways to escape — to kill time if nothing else — and every now and again, some of them act on it. Prison escapes are almost as doomed as riots; the authorities will spare no expense in re-capturing them, whether it takes thirty minutes or thirty years. Most are wanted dead or alive, and many inmates consider escape an alternative form of suicide. Despite that, prison breaks are still a real threat in even the most secure institution.

Once escapees are out of their cells (a comparatively easy process which can be achieved in a number of ways), the key goal in any prison break is getting past the outer walls. Just about every method has been tried at one time or another. Some prisoners dig tunnels, hiding the entryway behind false fronts and dispersing the dirt in the exercise yard. Tunnels are tricky to maintain and easily discovered, however; prisoners

must often work after lights out, and make as little noise as possible. Many prisons sink their walls deep under the earth to prevent any underground escapes, and more than a few cons have spent weeks of digging only to find themselves facing an impenetrable barrier of stone and brick. Cunning prisoners will utilize any large pipes or sewer tunnels to side-step such measures, but even then, they must be prepared for tough obstacles such as wire mesh grating or bricked-up dead ends.

Prisoners who can't go under the wall often try to climb over it, which takes much less time, but also a great deal of planning. Usually, they must find a so-called "dead spot" in the perimeter: someplace where the towers and searchlights can't readily see. Climbing devices such as ropes or ladders must first be built and then hidden until the escape... that is, assuming the prisoner has some way of anchoring such an object to the top of the wall. Free climbing is practically impossible, though some gaunts have managed it (and warlocks pose their own unique problems; see page 117 for more). Climbing the walls is more likely to end fatally than any other form of escape; those spotted will simply be strafed with machine-gun fire until they drop back down into the yard. Even if the wall or fence is breached, most institutions have a second barrier, with a kill zone where watching guards can shoot down an escaping prisoner. Successful escapes over a wall result either from meticulous planning or sheer, brazen desperation.

Other forms of escape involve hiding in laundry trucks and similar service vehicles as they leave the prison; disguising oneself as a guard or civilian (a nearly impossible task); and arranging for outside help, such as a low-flying airplane or similar vehicle. Some prisoners will take advantage of diversions to enact their escape, though such diversions are difficult to plan. "Walk-aways" are escapes from a chain gang or a minimum security facility. They are fairly common (though chain gang fugitives rarely get far), but re-capture ultimately involves a loss of privileges or transfer to a higher security prison. Minimum security escapees often live to regret their bid for freedom.

Once the prisoners have cleared the prison walls, the situation takes on the aspects of a fugitive scenario, dealt with in the beginning of this chapter. Specifics on hunting escaped prisoners can be found on page 98.

### WHO'S WHO IN THE BIG HOUSE

Below is a list of the general types of characters prisoners are likely to encounter during their confinement.

#### Guards and Prison Staff

Beyond a few visits from lawyers, friends and relatives, the officers and civilians who staff the prison are likely the only outsiders inmates will ever see. They constitute a small percentage of the prison population, but they hold the reins of power. Under their watchful eyes, every move of every prisoner is monitored, gauged, and altered to better maintain order. The guards handle most interactions with prisoners, able to dispense punishments or rewards as their duties dictate. (See page 110 for more information.)

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## NEW FISH

New fish are those just entering the prison system, who often struggle to adjust to life on the inside. When they first arrive, they are strip-searched, cleaned, and issued a basic kit (uniform, sheets, toiletries). Unlike modern prisons, which often have orientation programs and may even segregate new fish for the first few weeks, prisons in the U.C. usually throw them into the general population, issuing them a cell and a new roommate, and then letting them fend for themselves. The first few days are terrifying for new fish as the other cons size them up, sniff them out, and try to take advantage of their confusion. They are invariably marked as outsiders — fresh and unproven — and other cons will regard them with distrust until they get a better sense of who the new additions are. The weak will be tormented as a matter of course — beatings, theft, and worse are the norm — while the rest will soon be pressured to join one faction or another, creating new friends and foes in the process.

The unspoken rules are learned fairly quickly — who can be trusted, what activities are safe, how one can blend in to the prison society — and often reinforced with violence or punishment as the fish finds his boundaries. Those who don't adapt rarely survive. They're killed in a knife fight or their spirits are broken beyond repair, leading them to hollow existences at the bottom of the prison pecking order. But the tougher ones, or those with a pre-existing support network (such as the mob) emerge stronger from the ordeal, able to handle the brutal environment of incarceration and even thrive if the circumstances are right.

As jobs go, prison guards have a rough time of it. Their union is very poorly organized, and though they have gained a few concessions, salaries and benefits remain low. The job is stressful and dangerous; most guards are thrown into it with just a little training and possibly some military experience to draw on. Their job — and often their life — depends on maintaining authority over a numerically superior populace, leaving them prone to violence (or at least casual threats) against their charges. Corruption is common: as poorly paid as they are, most prison guards would jump at the chance to make a little extra money smuggling in contraband or looking the other way while an inmate breaks the rules. They're also affected by burnout, ennui, and rampant distrust... much of which they take out on the prisoners.

Which isn't to say guards are all bad. They have human emotions just like everyone else, and if treated with respect, they generally return that respect in kind. Convicts tend to divide them into two categories. "Hacks" are those simply drawing a paycheck, punching a clock and then going home after marking time for eight hours. "Cops" are those with a chip on their shoulder, constantly harassing prisoners for breaking

the rules, coping an attitude, or simply for the hell of it. The few who fall outside of these categories — those dedicated to their job and can keep an even temper while still enforcing order — are the ones whom the inmates come to respect.

Beside the guards, prisons sport an array of administrative and secretarial posts filled by well-behaved inmates, who perform maintenance and gardening chores as well as occasional office duties. The rest are either civilians working at a desk job (the warden's receptionist, for example) or some highly skilled duty requiring a trained professional. Every prison has a doctor on staff to care for inmates who grow sick, as well as a chaplain (usually Catholic) to provide for their spiritual needs. Neither assignment is particularly desirable from the standpoint of those who fill it, and most tend to either have a checkered past, or approach it in the same perfunctory fashion that the guards do.

At the top of the pyramid stands the warden, who is in charge of the entire prison. He is responsible for the welfare of everyone living and working there, he approves all hirings and firings (as well as drawing up the budget every year), and he answers to the director of corrections in charge of his province. The wardens of national prisons are governed by a specified sub-committee, appointed by the National Legislature. Ordinary prisoners almost never speak to the warden face-to-face. He delivers a "welcome" speech when they first arrive, and then generally remains distant — a figure of authority and/or menace who rapidly becomes the focus for all the prisoners' grievances.

## General Gangs

Within the incarcerated population, prison society is divided between groups of gangs struggling for control of contraband, petty privileges, and other symbols of power. In the Darwinian atmosphere of the yard, a group of allies is imperative to staying alive: lone wolves are vulnerable and weak, and rarely last long. Any prisoner hoping to survive will find a group of like-minded cons to bond with as quickly as he can.

Like the rest of the Unified Commonwealth, prisons see much less of the racial stratifying which marks our own world. Real-world prisons see gangs form along racial lines, exacerbating tensions and drawing clear distinctions between individual groups. A few such gangs can be found in *The Edge of Midnight*, but they are more the exception than the rule. Mixed groups are quite common inside prisons and — with the perennial exception of the gaunts — the color of an inmate's skin has little bearing on how other inmates treat him.

Instead, prison gangs often band together based on proximity, or on the type of crime they were convicted of. Those living in the same cell block will grow familiar with each other (and thus engender a natural camaraderie), while criminals who operated in the same neighborhood on the outside will hook back up again in the stir. What starts as mutual protection can often flourish into something more formal, and over time, prisons have developed long-established gangs much like those on the streets outside. Some of them have been around for decades, and even spread to other prisons: connected by loyalty and outside allies who keep them all in line.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES

Joining a gang usually requires an initiation rite: usually something daring but comparatively minor like stealing a personal effect from one of the guards. The hardest gangs demand that an initiate kill or injure one of their rivals (which indentures him to them for protection from reprisals). The perks come mainly in the form of safety. An attack on one member is an attack on the entire gang, and fellow members can be counted upon to support each other in times of trouble.

On the other hand, it also immediately entangles each member in whatever rivalries or conflicts the gang may have with others. Inmates to whom you personally have done no wrong may suddenly become your mortal enemy, while guards may hold you accountable for infractions one of your fellows committed. Furthermore, you can never leave the gang, regardless of circumstances. Those cast out of its ranks are in dire peril, as enemies make a point of snuffing them out. Smart convicts try to shy away from gangs. Though more vulnerable to attack, they also keep themselves clear of entangling alliances, and needn't worry about their safety if they get suddenly turned out.

Politics between rival gangs forms the key code of prison society: clashing with each other over power and territory the way any other criminal syndicate would. Prison administrators often use such conflicts to their advantage, keeping the prisoners divided against each other rather than united against their captors. In particularly wild prisons, the guards will sometimes strike a Faustian bargain with the strongest gang, using them to help police the other inmates in exchange for special privileges. More regulated prisons keep the populations in better check, forcing the gangs to compete for lesser prizes. And the conflicts never truly end; just as in the outside world, there are always new opportunities to compete for, new allies to win, and new enemies to destroy. And the inmates have all the time in the world to work on it...

### Syndicate Members

Organized crime always has a few of its members in prison, and the immense influence they wield on the outside pays big dividends on the inside. Essentially, syndicates are an instant prison gang, able to wield considerable influence solely on the merits of their outside reputation. Their compatriots can act with impunity on the outside, giving them access to all forms of contraband. They can afford high-priced lawyers to file appeals on their behalf, and even judges aren't immune to their dictates. Sentences can be overturned quite easily with little more than a hefty contribution to the ruling judge's retirement fund. Accordingly, other prisoners — and even guards — give them a wide berth. No one wants to trifle with a made inmate who can have one's family executed on general principles.



### FEMALE PRISONERS

Incarcerated women have their own facilities in the U.C., separate from the men and often staffed by female guards. (Male cons in the U.C.'s prison population outnumber females by a substantial margin, and the horrors inflicted upon women placed in a largely male prison population would be unspeakable.) The only exception is death row, which isolates individual prisoners enough so that women can be placed there without undue danger to their person. Other "connettes," as they are referred to, will sometimes occupy their own wing of an all-male prison if their numbers are small enough, but the atmosphere in such wings is vastly different from those in the remainder of the prison.

Women are less likely to commit violent crimes than men, and as such their prisons have fewer "hard core" felons. Female prisons generally have fewer incidents of violence, and female prisoners tend to bond more closely with their fellow inmates. Clutches of female prisoners often form surrogate families, with the eldest acting as matrons and teachers for the younger ones. Clashes are not uncommon, but they're rarely lethal, and few female prisoners carry weapons.

That being said, contraband smuggling and other "recreational activities" take place as often in women's prisons as they do in men's, and female prisoners engage in ruthless jockeying for social position just as men do. The only difference is that overt violence is usually limited to fist fights and perhaps a few impromptu weapons. Work details tend to be slightly less exhausting, focusing far more on maintenance and lower-impact industries like garment making.

Once they get out of prison, however, life for female ex-cons is more difficult than it is for males. While men have a certain aura of toughness and "street credit," women are looked at as soiled, and often fall into victimized positions such as prostitution or drug muling upon their release. The funds and inclination to correct such problems is no higher than it is for male offenders, making life hard indeed for those women who survive incarceration.

Privileges for syndicate members can be quite choice. Made inmates often enjoy private cells, easy work detail, and a guarantee to look the other way when contraband comes in. They can keep normally forbidden items such as record players or radios in their cell, and of course no one ever lays a hand on them. Most are serving relatively short stints (thanks to reduced charges and good lawyers) and even those in for the long haul expect to be treated with respect. Only those already working for the mob can be counted among their number, but those elite few experience prison as something other than hell on earth.



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

In exchange, they are expected to stick to company business. The prison economy makes an excellent outlet for stolen goods, drugs, and contraband, all of which the mob can easily gain through its connections. Mob members in the joint can keep generating income for the syndicate, eliminating rivals, silencing talkative guards, and generally making sure that the company's interests are met. Made men usually only accept cash for any contraband they smuggle in, which they transfer to outside accounts for laundering. Imprisoned mobsters will fight to maintain a monopoly on trade (just as they do on the outside), and try to keep other prison gangs from competing with them. They have a fearsome edge in such conflicts due to their outside resources.

Of course, special privileges and bullying business tactics are bound to build up some resentment... and inmates all have plenty of time to think of creative ways to balance the scales. Imprisoned mobsters sometimes grow too complacent, leaving them vulnerable to subtle forms of attack. Poisoning isn't uncommon (cleaning products can be slipped into meals over a period of time), and accidents involving made men have a nasty way of turning fatal. Furthermore, rival inmates are often more desperate than criminals on the outside, feeling they have much less to lose. Mobsters in the joint can often be surprised when the gang they thought they had cowed into submission suddenly comes at them with shivs in the shower, or arranges for an "untouchable" mob prisoner to take a nasty fall down the stairs.

Like anyone behind bars, mobsters are most concerned with getting out. No matter how sweet the lifestyle may be or how many perks they enjoy, they'll throw it over in a minute for a shot at freedom. And freedom for them is always just a slick lawyer or corrupt judicial appointee away.

## Ex-Cops and "Protective Cases"

Police officers and judges convicted of a crime merit special circumstances when placed in prison. Without protection, their average life expectancy is measured in days, as every con targets them for payback. Such prisoners, when identified, are usually placed in protective custody, which separates them from their fellow inmates. Certain facilities (mostly national prisons) have a separate wing housing "special security" cases. They sleep, bathe, and work in different locales, have different eating schedules, and use the yard when other prisoners are elsewhere. In so doing, they remain safe from retribution and can stay alive long enough to finish their sentences. Other prisons have no such special areas. They must place "special" prisoners in solitary confinement, pinning them in their cells 23 hours a day. Such prisoners are under extreme stress from the loneliness and lack of contact; only rarely do other inmates ever see them.

## Snitches

Every prison has its share of snitches — cons whom the guards use to keep tabs on the population. Snitching in prison is a death sentence if you get caught, so those who do it must act with caution. Some convicts inform on their fellow prisoners as part of a power play — hurting a rival by telling the guards about the contraband he's smuggling, for example. Oth-

ers do it to curry favor with the guards. Whatever the reason, it's forbidden in most con circles, as it violates the implied "us vs. them" unity among prisoners. Snitches can't speak to the guards when circumstances look suspicious, and they must always look over their shoulder for fear that someone has found them out. On a few occasions, it's considered acceptable — mainly as a way of avenging a legitimate slight. But even then, the situation must not be repeated... or at least, it had better stay tightly under wraps.

Furthermore, once you inform on someone, the guards have your number. They can extort more information out of you simply by threatening to tell the other prisoners that you informed. Snitches are quickly caught in an endless cycle, forced to do the administration's bidding at risk to their own safety. It's usually only a matter of time before they're found out. Theoretically, they can be placed in protective custody or transferred to another prisoner, but most administrations rarely bother. They can always find another informant.

## Gaunts

Unlike other parts of society, gaunts are rarely segregated in prison. While they often cluster together and form their own gangs distinct from the normal populace, they are almost never housed in separate wings or cell blocks. The reasons for this vary. In the first place, a great concentration of gaunts means drastically higher maintenance bills, as their draining effect quickly corrodes the building around them. By spreading gaunts out among the populace, wardens can lessen the overall effect and keep repair bills manageable (as well as ensuring that a cell door doesn't corrode and fall to pieces.) Similarly, a gaunts' draining has a pacifying effect on normal prisoners, rendering them more docile and easier to control. An inmate with a gaunt cell mate will often feel fatigued and exhausted, meaning that he'll put up less of a fight when given an order from the guards. Canny administrators will often bunk troublemaking normals with newly-arrived gaunts, hoping to put a damper on their defiance. It has proven quite effective.

Because of this, anti-gaunt prejudice within prisons is even higher than it is on the outside. Normal prisoners know that gaunts will weaken them, and many refuse to interact with them in any way. Fights are common, and fatalities fairly high. One less gaunt means one less way of keeping the inmates down, and despite their increased strength and endurance, a gaunt may be targeted for assassination solely because he is a gaunt. Leatherback gangs are understandably vicious in supporting their own, brutality being the best means they have of protection.

Guards, too, tend to be wary of gaunts; an angry leatherback can be extremely hard to put down. When a guard has to placate a gaunt prisoner, he usually waits for back-up, and rarely approaches without three or four friends nearby. Many prisons have begun hiring gaunts as guards, both to help with the incarcerated leatherbacks, and to further intimidate the normals. Gaunt prisoners and gaunt guards rarely get along; each side considers the other a disgrace to "their kind."

More on gaunts can be found in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven of this book.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES



### Warlocks

Warlocks present a unique challenge for prison administrators. How do you contain an inmate who can tear walls apart like tissue paper, or levitate himself out of the prison yard? Even those with minor powers can cause trouble — shorting out electrical gates or helping other inmates quickly dig tunnels. Accordingly, warlock prisoners are watched very closely and dealt with extremely harshly.

The most effective means of coercion is threat: warlocks attempting to escape are usually shot on sight, and few, if any, are ever returned to prison alive. Those who cause too many problems are subjected to Antidox, turned into functional idiots and left to spend the rest of their days as janitors or toilet scrubbers. The promise of such horrors is often enough to keep imprisoned warlocks in line, rather than risking escape or punishment. Were they not so addicted to their magic — prone to use it even if they know what it means for them — many would make ideal inmates.

Beyond that, prison administrators keep them in conditions where escape is unlikely. Confining them to cells in the center

of the prison, for example, means that they must clear more barriers before they can break free, giving guards time to raise the alarm and perhaps halt the prisoner in his tracks. Head counts on warlocks take place every hour, and sharpshooters monitor their time in the yard, poised to fire at the first sign of any move to escape. Naturally, warlocks tend to spend their leisure time in the library, reading or studying newspaper reports. They are denied access to scientific journals as a matter of course.

Of the entire prison population, warlocks are among those least likely to ally themselves with other prisoners. Indeed, the rest of the convicts tend to shy away from them, unwilling to risk a confrontation with a legitimate magic practitioner. As a consequence, most warlocks in prison are solitary and unmolested, left to do their time in peace and seclusion.

The rare occasions when a warlock prisoner does act out, however, are terrifying to behold. In the most dangerous circumstances, they will tear into other prisoners with arcane knowledge, twisting them inside out before they can so much as blink. Lesser warlocks can still cause serious damage to

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

fellow inmates, as well as wreaking havoc with the prison facilities. The most dangerous warlocks are the lifers — those sentenced to spend the rest of their days behind bars — who often feel as though they have nothing to lose and will wait until the worst possible moment to act out. Riots are particularly perilous; the chaos and confusion make a fine cover for an escape, and unless the prisoners are bottled up quickly, it may be days before the warlock's absence is noted. Most warlocks are drugged with sedatives before being transported to prison — the likelihood of flight in transit is simply too great.

Gunmetal Island prison in Gateway has adopted a series of unique measures aimed at disciplining warlocks. They utilize rotating sleep cycles, grounded floors, and solitary confinement on their prisoners as an alternative to Antidox. The results have been promising and other prisons are looking into them for use on their warlock inmates. More information can be found in the *Edge of Midnight* core rulebook, page 184.

## Death Row

The Unified Commonwealth has a nationwide death penalty policy, though specifics vary from district to district. Every province has a series of prisons designed to hold those awaiting execution — usually on “death row,” a separated block of cells used only by inmates awaiting the death penalty. The appeals process is lengthy, sometimes taking years, and many groups in the U.C. oppose the death penalty on moral grounds. Because of that, death row inmates are kept imprisoned for quite some time before actually receiving an execution date.

Method of execution depends on the province. The majority inflict death by electrocution (the infamous electric chair); others use the gas chamber, firing squad, or lethal injection. The rise in magic use initially introduced more barbaric forms of execution into the system — hanging or even burning at the stake. But as the initial fervor died down, those methods were quietly set aside, and only a few inmates were killed

in such ways regardless. Every execution is draped in the formality of routine. A certain check list is followed, with guards ticking off various duties one by one. Final meals, a will and testament... every detail is seen to with the same standardized care. A coroner attends every execution, to verify the death and to ensure that the process was conducted as quickly and efficiently as possible. The director of corrections for the province in question has the ability to halt an execution, and commute a death penalty to a sentence of life without parole. If he does so, however, he must provide ample justification lest the officials who appointed him find someone else to carry out his duties.

Life for condemned prisoners is very similar to life for other prisoners. The only difference is that they are isolated from both the general population and each other. They spend twenty-three hours a day in their cells, take meals there, and communicate with other prisoners on death row only by speaking through their bars. They are allowed one hour a day for exercise — usually in an enclosed area far away from the general population — and may take one ten-minute shower (alone) every other day. All death row inmates are escorted from place to place while handcuffed; they are never allowed to wander around free. Many of them are consumed with their case, and spend long hours in legal research or corresponding with their lawyer. They also read, listen to the radio, and play chess with each other. Radio broadcasts often have a pacifying effect on prisoners (assuming they can agree on what to listen to), and many death row facilities incorporate them as a matter of course.



## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES

### THE JAILBIRD CAMPAIGN

For some role-playing groups, a stint in prison holds little interest. If their characters are incarcerated, the players will simply create new ones, or else pick up the threads of the campaign when their prison term ends. Other groups, however, might be intrigued by the unique challenges of a prison setting — either for part or the entirety of an *Edge of Midnight* campaign. This section is intended to provide a few guidelines for running such a game.

Campaigns in which the PCs are career criminals can easily shift back and forth between prison and the outside; the characters are caught and punished for their misdeeds (necessitating a period of prison-based scenarios) before serving their time and returning to the streets (shifting the campaign back to more familiar territory). This may be preferable for parties who wish to sample prison-based stories rather than base the whole of their role-playing on it. For obvious reasons, prisoners don't work well in mixed parties. Those outside the walls have far more freedom of action, giving them the bulk of role-playing opportunities while the prisoner character sits cooling his heels in his cell. In rare cases, a mixed group can work together for a session or two — with outsiders performing one set of actions, while their incarcerated mates perform a different set of concurrent actions as part of the same grand design — but maintaining such a state for longer than a few sessions is next to impossible. In most cases, a jailbird campaign means that every character is in prison at once — usually as inmates, although perhaps one or two can serve as sympathetic guards.

In essence, a jailbird campaign is no different than any other criminal campaign; only the trappings and types of fellow characters change. The PCs will still have goals to meet, as well as obstacles to avoid and enemies to thwart. Like any other campaign, the GM should carefully gauge the PCs' motivations and craft challenges which fit them. If they wish to stay out of inmate politics, they may face constant pressure to join one gang or another (and gain enemies and allies accordingly). If they hope to make money during their incarceration, they'll need to set up a means of smuggling in contraband or the like (and protect it from the inevitable competition). Many players will focus the bulk of their attention on escape (the helplessness and subjugation of prison simply doesn't sit well with the average PC), which could take a great deal of planning and time before coming to fruition. The guards are a constant threat, and other prisoners can make life extremely difficult for even the hardest PC.



PCs have one big advantage in prison: an instant support network in the form of the party itself. Even if the characters meet each other for the first time in prison, they are far more likely to trust each other than any NPCs, and will doubtless gravitate together for mutual benefit. This will initially free them from the pressures of joining another gang for protection, and shield them from the harsher realities other inmates must confront. At the same time, the setting also enforces a certain amount of separation upon them. Prison campaigns have a great deal of downtime, where the characters are stuck alone in their cells or otherwise without back-up. The players have little choice in the matter — it's simply life behind bars — which gives the GM an opportunity to play upon their vulnerabilities with an attack or other dangerous situation. The interplay between the periods when the PCs can meet up and join forces and those times when they are without their companions makes for considerable drama, and can help focus the players' priorities. An inmate who threatens to kill one of them while alone, for example, is actually a larger threat than a rival gang fighting with the characters for control of the yard. Such dangers can also be used to make the players work together even if their characters aren't inclined to. Survival is everything in prison, and the natural bond between PCs can both improve their chances and result in new problems to solve.

Most prison-based scenarios center around character role-playing and interaction. The confined circumstances means that there is very little freedom to do much more than talk; violence must be carefully applied, and extended fights are usually broken up by the guards before they get too far. Other tasks are restricted simply because the characters have no opportunity to undertake them (it's not like the warden ever lets them test their safecracking abilities on his strongbox). The few skills which are practiced (moving silently, for example) become essential survival tools which everyone learns to some degree or another. Not surprisingly, prison campaigns tend to be extremely Machiavellian, based on perception and intimidation rather than brute force. Players engaged in a prison campaign can expect to do a lot of talking: convincing guards to help them, currying favor with other prisoners, and generally jockeying for position. When action is called for, it's usually swift and immediate, requiring fast thinking lest the opportunity be lost. Players who enjoy gunfights and lots of action are apt to be frustrated with a prison campaign.

Even more than on the outside, every action has a consequence in prison. A PC may "win" a fistfight with a fellow prisoner, only to find himself thrown into the hole for a week... and thus unable to help the other characters with their escape tunnel. Someone trying to mind his own business might make an enemy when he refuses to join a given gang, and thus must seek out a rival gang for aid. By judicious application of this principle, the GM can quickly enmesh the PCs into prison society, and thus create fodder for new scenarios.

Assuming the characters don't spend the rest of their days behind bars, a prison campaign can end in one of two ways; release or escape.



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Release essentially returns the characters to society, where they may pursue whatever goals they wish. A GM wishing to end his campaign on a positive note can finish things up with the characters' release, leaving them both with a sense of accomplishment and a feeling that their characters will live as happily ever after as *The Edge of Midnight* allows. Those with more juice left in their campaign can simply return to more traditional scenarios — with the possible addition of parole officers and a known criminal record into the mix.

Escape rarely ends the campaign for good; at least right away. Instead of free men, the characters will now be wanted fugitives, hunted from one end of the U.C. to the other. Once the characters break out, the campaign essentially becomes a fugitive scenario, as they seek safety and freedom away from their pursuers. Details for running such scenarios can be found in the first part of this chapter.

Barring those two possibilities, the campaign will end in prison somewhere, either with the characters resigned to their lives of pain and ignominy or achieving some measure of peace with their surroundings.

## PRISONER AND FUGITIVE NPCs

### LT. FRANK "FRANKENSTEIN" SPECK, PRISON GUARD

Despite the prejudice and marks against them, many gaunts can make a good living working as guards in the prison system. Gaunt hacks are unseen by the civilian population, making it easier to get hired without drawing public outcry. With their intimidating features, physical prowess, and vampiric draining, they make excellent watchmen, and many prisons feel that the benefits they offer far outweigh the drawbacks. Human guards still outnumber them, but many gaunts see this niche as one of the few ways to make an honest living. And in the entire prison system, there's no one who relishes his job like Frankie Speck.

Now a senior hack in Bandello Prison near Central City, Speck started life as a criminal himself before the change took him. His name then was Tommy Parker, and he ran petty extortion shakedowns in the streets of downtown. The change occurred shortly after the war, serving as an unforeseen second chance that allowed him to escape his old life. No one could connect his new hulking form with the rather weaselly normal he used to be, and with no family or friends to contact (or identify him), he resolved to turn over a new leaf. Tommy Parker died and Frank Speck was born.

Unfortunately, decent work was hard to come by. He strung together a few odd jobs on construction sites and the like, but the financial pinch was severe and he wondered if he would have to take up his criminal ways again just to keep food on the table. He was contemplating just such a move when his eyes passed a want ad asking for prison guards — and the usual "normals only" caveat seemed conspicuously absent from the description.

Speck was hired on the spot and spent the next eight years helping the inmates in Bandello do the hardest time they could. He remembered his old knack for intimidation very quickly, and his physical skills meant that even the toughest con thought twice before tackling him. He's survived two stabbings in the course of his tenure; both times he put the assailants in the prison hospital. His hulking form gave him the nickname "Frankenstein" among the inmates, and his fellow guards soon picked up on it as well. He currently commands the guards in the facility's west wing, answering directly to Captain Morris Phelps. The position is unheralded for a gaunt, but no one suggests that he hasn't earned it.

He approaches his job with a carrot/stick philosophy, rewarding cons who follow the rules while punishing those who seek to flaunt or ignore them. Usually, a throaty growl or a few ominous words are enough to keep the inmates in line. He never gives anyone a chance after that; he simply beats them senseless and drags them off to the hole for a few weeks — usually with a savage grin on his lips. Rewards are delivered by other guards and are comparatively minor — increased shower time, for example, or the provision to keep certain pieces of contraband — but the effect is demonstrable. The inmates know who makes such decisions, and they take care to stay on Speck's good side.

Speck's efficiency is actually based on an unusual form of self-hatred. The felons under his care remind him of who he used to be — a life which he's forgotten, but which nonetheless fills him with a dark, unnameable shame. He keeps his feelings sharply in check, only to draw upon them when the time comes to assert himself. The effect is devastating and has helped him rise rapidly through the ranks of Bandello guards, a fact he tries to console himself with on dark nights.

Speck is tall and broadly built, like many gaunts. His uniform is slightly tight and bulges at the seams from the mass of muscle beneath it. His face has been deeply scarred by acne (one of the few traits that survived the change intact), forming rifts in his cheeks and forehead. He carries neither gun nor stick while walking his rounds: huge hands topped by talon-like nails are enough to do the job. Off-duty, he's fairly quiet and reserved, though he enjoys listening to the Switchmen games on a battered radio and plays a monthly poker game with the other guards. He's learned to function on extremely little sleep. His dreams are dark and troubled, filled with images of punishment for crimes he cannot remember. In his unspoken heart, he wonders if he might belong on the other side of the bars — and his every waking moment is consumed with proving otherwise.

#### Lt. Frank Speck

**Attributes:** Brains 4, Brawn 9, Build 9, Gut 5, Moxie 4, Smoothness 5.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 45.

**Skills:** Athletics 5, Brawl 7, Bureaucracy 3, Evasion 6, Intimidation 9, Medicine 3, Perception 7, Streetwise 4.

**Backgrounds:** Alert, Gaunt, Huge.

**Profession:** Officer of the Law 2.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRISONERS AND FUGITIVES

### WILSON SCUTTER, PRISONER #3A4B22

Wilson is the chief librarian at Vineland Prison, north of New Eden. He's also the leading authority on outside information and a key link in the prison's underground economy. He arrived here sometime before the war, convicted of poisoning his wife and the man she was seeing (the two of them came to him to reveal their affair and discuss a resolution; he responded by mixing arsenic into their tea). The other prisoners had him pegged as a dandelion, and attempted to roll right over him; he earned a brief reprieve when he landed a lucky punch against the gaunt trying to steal his dessert one evening. After that, he received a modicum of respect from his peers, but he knew it was only a matter of time before another challenger tried to push him... and he doubted the lucky punch would repeat itself.

Before that happened, he was contacted by a skinny gaunt named Jackson Runyon: member of a fairly prominent New Eden gang. Runyon had an offer for him. Assist his associates in delivering contraband and they would protect him from the other prisoners. Scutter agreed unhesitatingly.

The system was simple. As librarian, he would take requests from inmates for reading material: westerns, crime thrillers, copies of *The Living Land* magazine or whatever was in vogue. Every book in the library was code for a form of contraband; if a prisoner wanted something, he would ask for a "hardcover" copy of the volume corresponding to his request (Vineland's library has no hardcover books). Scutter would tally them and get them back to Runyon and his gang. He would then collect payment as he made his nightly rounds, and smuggle the contraband to the prisoners hidden in a set of hollowed-out books he made. Runyon's associates never had to deal with their clients face-to-face, and Scutter was kept safe to do his time in peace.

He's now a major linchpin for illicit trade in Vineland. *Everything* comes through him; more than a few prisoners are convinced that he's actually running the show, and that Runyon's merely his protection. Runyon's perfectly happy to let them go on believing that. It makes Scutter an excellent scapegoat if his little operation is discovered. But so far, no one's been the wiser: not the guards, not the cons, not even the warden. The arrangement has left Scutter free to open a few side operations of his own; though he's far too smart to cross Runyon, he's not above making book on a few bets and has organized a prison-wide boxing league with the warden's approval. It's given him something resembling a nest egg should he ever be fortunate enough to earn parole.

Scutter keeps track of all the "orders" — both contraband and wagers — in his own form of short-hand, which he scribbles into the margins of a particularly thick paperback book. He keeps it — and another ledger, sandwiched between the covers of a hollowed-out Bible — in the "private collections" shelf at the library, safe from both other prisoners and guards performing a contraband search. He minds his own business and never causes trouble, which keeps him safe from the hacks, and Runyon's protection has increased his standing among the other inmates. Most cons in Vineland are on at least speaking

terms with him; he's also known as a good resource for legal advice, and can help other inmates with their case if they have a need. In the last decade, he's become as much a fixture of Vineland as the walls and bars.

Rumor even has it that he knows of an escape route out of the prison. According to the story, a pair of cell mates built a tunnel all the way out to the woods beyond the fire line. They were killed before they got very far, but the administration only bricked up the front and back of the tunnel, since they couldn't afford to do much more. Scutter found the map leading to it wedged into one of the late escapee's books. If someone were to get it from him, they need only work through the brick barriers to have an instant path to freedom. Like many things, however, Scutter refuses to reveal whether there is any truth to the stories.

He has now settled comfortably into middle age, with a balding pate and a modest potbelly in spite of the atrocious prison food. He walks with a slight stoop but his steps are sure and solid: he's used to moving from one place to the next very quickly. He places a priority on looking presentable, often trading favors to make sure his prison uniform is neat and pressed. He's constantly polishing his spectacles, so often in fact that he often can't see who's approaching him. His demeanor is flat and polite at all times; his survivor's mentality has left him calm and very collected. Scutter is an expert at deceiving others without actually lying. He chooses facts with meticulous care and never reveals anything unless he needs to. Scutter has very little family on the outside; his sister disowned him when he was convicted, and his parents died long ago. He's an institution man now. He believes that the province will never let a killer like him out, and if he's going to have any kind of a life, he's got to find it inside of Vineland. From where he's standing, he's played the cards he was dealt pretty damn well.

#### Wilson Scutter

**Attributes:** Brains 6, Brawn 3, Build 4, Gut 5, Moxie 6, Smoothness 4.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 20.

**Skills:** Appraise 4, Bureaucracy 7, Etiquette 6, Evasion 3, Fast Talk 5, Firearms 2, Forgery 4, Perception 4, Pick Lock 3, Puzzles 4, Stealth 4, Streetwise 5.

**Backgrounds:** Education, Lucky, Wise.

**Profession:** Investigator 1.

### WALTER CURRANT, FUGITIVE WARLOCK

The Flying Trapeze casino in Paradiso caters to an eclectic mixture of high stakes gamblers and low-rent thugs. It's typical of Paradiso's North Side: a ripe slice of sleaze dolled up in an attractive mask of neon lights. Situated in a quiet corner of the gambling hall — away from the crowds and the drinks and the laughter — is a card table manned by an unassuming employee named Walter Carrant. He's been working here for about a year and a half; he does his job efficiently and without

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

fuss, which makes him a favorite among those who like to play alone. Most of those who know him suspect him of some dark past. Few would guess that he is actually Walter Kassovitz, one of the most sought-after warlocks in the U.C.

Walter was born and raised in Nova Roma. He grew up longing for the power and prestige of elected office, seeing it as a way to escape his family's humble working-class roots. He had little charisma or magnetism as it turned out — a bitter reality which he never completely accepted — though he did have a knack for underhanded dealing. He turned to magic as an alternative, fascinated by the ways in which it eeled around the laws of the universe... much the same way those in power eeled around the laws of the state. It gave him an edge which he desperately craved, and allowed him to attain some measure of the power he desired by selling his services to the powerful. Someone who needed a warlock to stage a theft, dispose of evidence, or just fan the flames of anti-magic hysteria always found a ready source in Walter. He gave them what they wanted and charged exorbitant rates for his services, sometimes even blackmailing clients by threatening to reveal his connections to them. It was a risky game in the simmering anti-magic atmosphere of Nova Roma, but he played it well and it gave him some measure of satisfaction.

The bill came due when one of his clients was uncovered by Praetor Patrick Deacon's office; the man fingered him as the head of a "sorcerous conspiracy," which Deacon used to maximum effect. This was in the period following the Twelve Days of Chaos (see page 108 of the *Edge of Midnight* core rulebook), and the government had no wish to repeat the bedlam that had only recently been placed under control. The NLEB arrested Kassovitz in a carefully orchestrated raid, and planned to put him on trial in front of the cameras so that the public could witness justice in action.

But Walter had other ideas. His list of clients could embarrass a great many people if it got out, and several powerful Praetors had no wish to air their dirty laundry in public. They arranged for Currant to make a jailbreak, escaping through an uncompleted sewer pipe before he could be formally charged. They also alerted the local police, and instructed them exactly where the fugitive would emerge from the tunnels. The cops were supposed to shoot him dead in the attempt, thus eliminating him as a threat. Walter anticipated the move however, and used his density magic to dig a new tunnel out from the sewer several miles away. By the time they discovered the ruse, he had hopped a train far away from Nova Roma.

The ensuing chase proved exhausting both to Walter and to the small army of NLEB agents assigned to his capture. They kept word of the escape mum, fearing a panic if it became public, but quietly, the authorities marshaled every resource they could to find him. Walter knew that recapture was tantamount to a death sentence, so he was equally motivated to stay ahead of his pursuers. He became remarkably adept at hiding in plain sight. Though he avoided fellow warlocks like the plague, he found a knack for working amid other underworld types, especially in public places like horse tracks and casinos. The authorities searched for him in the expected war-

lock's hiding places, or else assumed he would blend in with the normal populace. No one expected him to side with gaunts or "straight" criminals, which he did whenever he could. The trick worked amazingly well.

He drifted from place to place in no particular hurry, always with an eye on the local authorities, and on the pursuers he knew had never given up. He made no enemies and never pushed himself too hard. He even managed to kick the magic habit — no mean feat considering its addictive pull. The only thing he missed was the sense of control it gave him and that, he felt, was a casualty of his arrest. When the time was right, he would re-assert it again. For now, it simply wouldn't be prudent.

He eventually found himself in Paradiso, where he landed a job as a card shark at the Flying Trapeze. His bosses were deeply connected with organized crime, using the Trapeze as a front for money laundering operations. Currant played dumb, did his job, and watched them very carefully. He soon tabulated which players were legitimate, and which were mob skills playing with stolen money. He wrote it all down — for insurance if needed — and hid it in the floorboards beneath his modest apartment. When the time comes, he intends to ask his bosses for help in moving abroad — perhaps to Iberana, where his skills as a card dealer can be put to good use. There, he can finally stop looking over his shoulder, and perhaps even go back to practicing magic. And if his employers balk, he has the leverage to force their hand. Some skills, it seems, never go out of style...

Currant/Kassovitz is a slight man in his early thirties with a thin sharp face and piercing blue eyes. His head is shaved bald and his beard clipped short in a pointed Van Dyke, a marked difference from his appearance back in Nova Roma. He wears a simple tuxedo while working: a cheap yet functional number that looks like it came straight off the rack. He is calm and unassuming in front of others, offering little but listening a great deal. He's a skilled card dealer, and his forgettable appearance has a calming effect on those he plays with. While not a formal academic, he studied a great deal during his warlock days, and he still reads voraciously when he can. It's been three years since he last practiced any magic. He feels the pull of it every day, but his fear of being discovered has so far beaten out his desire to wield it again. The fact that he has worked in the service of several gaunt and anti-warlock gangsters — who would be none too pleased to hear of his deception — only adds to his caution.

## Walter Currant

**Attributes:** Brains 7, Brawn 5, Build 6, Gut 7, Moxie 6, Smoothness 5.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 30.

**Skills:** Athletics 6, Brawl 5, Bureaucracy 3, Contortions 5, Disguise 6, Drive (Car, Motorboat) 5, Etiquette 4, Evasion 5, Fast Talk 6, Firearms 4, Gravity 6, Perception 7, Pick Lock 5, Sleight of Hand 6, Stealth 5, Streetwise 4, Tensile Energy 8.

**Backgrounds:** Education, Magical Aptitude, Rugged.

**Profession:** Con Artist 1, Rogue Scientist 1.



Two gnomes with large ears and pointed noses stand in the upper left. A large, ornate clock face is in the upper right. The background is a faded, high-contrast image of a busy street scene with many people and buildings.

# CHAPTER FIVE GNAINT CHARACTERS

™For sufferance is the badge  
of all our tribe...

- *The Merchant of Venice*,  
Act I, scene iii



## GAUNT CHARACTERS

*Gail's steps echoed down the street in short, brisk staccatos. Her feet throbbed with exhaustion; it had been a hell of a shift at the diner and she wanted nothing more than to collapse in her chair and let a glass of bourbon take the edge off. But Artie hadn't let her go until after the bus lines had stopped running, and now she was stuck tromping through the grimy, slum-ridden neighborhood between the diner and her modest apartment. She was a tough dame and knew how to take care of herself, but her pace still suggested someone in a hurry. It wouldn't do to linger in these dark alleyways.*

*The mugger struck anyway. She was passing a darkened doorway when he emerged out of the shadows, a heavy blackjack in his hand. He struck her at the base of the skull and she tumbled to her knees, her vision a mass of exploding stars. She made a dazed turn, trying to focus on her attacker when he punched her in the mouth. Blood spurted hot and copper over her tongue, stifling the weak scream which lurked in her throat. She clawed feebly at his jacket as he grabbed her purse away from her, struggling to put up some kind of resistance. He pushed her down with laughable ease, his fingers reaching for the pearls around her neck. They were just imitation — a cheap heirloom from her mother — but still she could do nothing but lie there helplessly as his rough glove slid around her-*

*"Police! Halt!"*

*The cry rang out like the clarion of an angel. Gail's attacker turned in time to catch a nightstick across the jaw. Blood and teeth sprayed across the nearby brick wall as the cop loomed large in the shadows. His badge gleamed in the dim moonlight, his features obscured beneath the cap worn tightly on his head. In a flash, he had leapt between Gail and her attacker, raising his stick and readying another blow. It never came. The mugger lay limp against the wall, making no move to get up. Black crimson still dribbled from his jaw, and the purse fell limply from his fingers as the strength left him.*

*Gail breathed a painful sigh of relief as the policeman offered his hand to help her up. She took it gratefully.*

*"Lucky I was here, ma'am. That fellow looked like he meant business."*

*"Yes. He- he caught me off-guard." She climbed smiling to her feet. "I don't know how to thank y-"*

*Her words died in her throat when she finally got a good look at her rescuer. Pointed ears stood out from beneath his cap, framing a face stretched like old leather across his bones. His nose was an empty pair of holes while sharp needle-like teeth protruded from his gray lips. The hand which gripped hers was a taloned claw, filed down to socially acceptable lengths but still cutting subtly into her palms like a razor. His breath stank of raw meat, his eyes beady black pinpricks that gleamed dull like a shark's in the moonlight.*

*Closing her eyes, Gail finally found the strength to scream.*

Few figures in Commonwealth society are more tragic — or more dangerous — than the gaunts. Cursed by the whims of fate, sentenced to a life of exclusion and hopelessness, they struggle along the U.C.'s underbelly, trying to get ahead any

way they can. Many turn to crime — the only option available where wealth and success are more than just pipe dreams. Others fight against the odds to make their mark in the legitimate world, battling prejudice and misconception at every turn. For better or for worse, they embody the U.C.'s underworld. Their gray leathery faces speak of betrayal and woe, but they're here to stay, and if the world won't give them what they need... some of them are prepared to take it.

Basics facts and figures on gaunts can be found in Chapter Six of the *Edge of Midnight* core rulebook. This section develops and expands upon that earlier information.

## OVERVIEW OF GAUNT CULTURE

Gaunt society is still largely in the birthing process. While they retain the cultural stamp imprinted upon all the inhabitants of the Unified Commonwealth, their outsider status denies them the same sense of belonging that normals take for granted. In the years since the war, they have struggled with that reality, trying to regain a sense of who they are in a world that hardly cares for them. It's an uphill battle, but the first signs of a unique gaunt culture are beginning to emerge.

The most noted feature of gaunt society is their childlessness, for gaunts cannot reproduce. This helps explain their alienation: without progeny to care for, they have no sense of continuity or relationship with a new generation who will carry on the work they leave behind. The effect of this on gaunt psyche is profound. Gaunts often live for the moment, working for what they can while they can, and rarely taking the future into consideration. Their own welfare comes first; the needs and desires of family and parentage never enter into their thinking.

Strangely enough, this often translates into a supreme work ethic. Their achievements are all the legacy they have to leave to the world, leading them to invest significant care and attention into what they do. Gaunt construction workers speak with noticeable pride about the buildings or public works they helped erect, while gaunt religious leaders will move heaven and earth to foster philanthropic organizations. This extends to less tangible achievements too: gaunt cops working overtime to put some scumbag behind bars, or a gaunt switchman devising a more efficient means to do his job. Gaunts often treat their profession with the same reverence which normals save for their nearest and dearest.

Consequently, many gaunts are sturdy workers, and can be counted upon to do their jobs quickly and efficiently. They apply themselves with great industry, and with their increased strength and stamina, can often work for longer hours (and less pay) than normal humans. This places employers in a nasty Catch-22. On the one hand, gaunts would appear to be ideal workers, far preferable to their normal counterparts. On the other hand, the friction they cause among normal coworkers — coupled with general bigotry and the damage caused by their vampiric draining — makes many employees uneasy. As a consequence, they find themselves in an uneasy balance

## CHAPTER FIVE: GAUNT CHARACTERS

with the rest of the workforce. Their services are in demand, but only to a point. Others want their skill and dedication, but are rarely willing to pay for it... and they know that gaunts have little choice but to take what's offered. The constant push and pull between fulfillment and frustration causes a great deal of stress among the leatherbacks. Even the most humble garbage collector wants to take some pride in his work; if he can't, depression, surliness, and even violence may follow.

Without a traditional sense of family to connect with, gaunt social bonds are usually formed by proximity, and by the strange relationship which new gaunts have with more experienced leatherbacks. Gaunts are bound together by the nature of their affliction, which gives them far more in common than just appearance. Every gaunt can speak to the disorientation or confusion he felt when he first changed; every gaunt knows what it's like to see normals shrink back in fear or tell them nervously that they're "not qualified" for a job. They also congregate together for safety reasons, since lone gaunts may be targeted by bigoted normals (see below). Because of this, gaunt camaraderie comes very naturally, and two gaunts who have never met may feel an instant bond to one another.

This feeling is compounded whenever a newly created gaunt enters the picture. Still fresh from his transformation, he is often confused and disoriented, with little idea of how to cope with his new life. More experienced gaunts tend to gravitate towards these newcomers, drawn by sympathy and a desire to help. They assist the new gaunt in finding a place to live, getting enough food to eat, and finding a job if possible. They also explain any ground rules from the local community, if necessary. For example, in a crime-ridden gaunt district, they might explain which areas are controlled by hostile gangs, or which normal cops can be trusted if trouble arises. The newcomer is often supremely grateful for this assistance, and ends up forming a quick bond with his new mentor. Mentors, for their part, feel less socially ostracized, and now have a new companion with whom they can talk and commiserate.

In this manner, clutches or gangs of gaunts tend to form in the slums and neighborhoods where they live. They average ten to fifteen gaunts apiece, though some can grow as large as one hundred. All of them will occupy the same area — a floor, a dilapidated building, even an entire square block if space permits — and their interactions will mainly be with each other. They will meet on the stoop of their building to talk or play checkers, participate in a sporting game with another group nearby, or just huddle around someone's fireplace and

try to keep warm. The most experienced gaunts assume natural leadership positions, having assisted most of the others in adjusting to their new lives. These "block captains" will interact with others on behalf of the group: speak to police, argue with other gaunt leaders, etc.

Loyalty within a given group is very strong. The gaunts' displaced sense of fraternity finds fertile ground amid fellows who truly seem to understand. They share resources, pool monetary funds (an employed gaunt will often support three or four companions with his meager paycheck), and consider a strike against one of them a strike against them all. Many of them extend this loyalty to the area they inhabit. They will work to make it as presentable as possible, fighting a losing battle against their own draining aura in attempting to improve their living spaces. (Successful gaunt criminals are notorious for conspicuous consumption, spending huge amounts of money on clothes, jewelry, and cars in an effort to eliminate all traces of their corrupting aura.)

Though primarily centered around their living spaces, such bonding can take place in other venues as well. Co-workers in particular tend to cling together more closely than normals, especially in the face of union prejudice or other opposition. It can even extend to normals who work with gaunts. Police officers paired with a gaunt partner are amazed at how loyal and selfless leatherbacks can be, to the point of sacrificing themselves for the sake of their teammates. Some would say that gaunts act this way only to protect what they have, and they might be right. On the other hand, such loyalty, when earned, is earned for life, and companies willing to hire gaunts sometimes go to great lengths to engender that devotion in their employees.

### GAUNTS AND PREJUDICE

Legally speaking, the gaunts are the elephant in the room that nobody talks about. The term has never appeared in any legislation, and no laws discriminating against gaunts have ever been put into effect. Gaunts still have the same rights as normals, enjoy the same legal protections, and in the purest technical sense, have nothing to distinguish them from other members of society. At the same time, however, neither are they afforded any special treatment under the law, which allows individual acts of discrimination to flourish. A storeowner, for example, can bar gaunts from his establishment without suffering any consequences. Similarly, the gaunts' penchant for raw meat means that restaurants must segregate them for health code reasons. Landlords will charge them higher rent to compensate for the wear and tear their draining ability has on their property, and while they can legally apply for any job they wish, no law exists to prevent an employer from dismissing them out of hand. Thus the gaunts are made second-class citizens via unspoken assumption, divided by invisible barriers from the better life that the law claims everyone is entitled to.

The result is *de facto* segregation, affecting every aspect of life and enforced by silent consent. Gaunt districts form through their corrupting aura, turning new buildings into dilapidated wrecks. Without regular (and expensive) mainte-



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD



nance, they soon become an eyesore for the entire neighborhood, driving down real estate prices and compelling the more affluent normals to move away. Such normals are replaced by gaunts, of course, who only increase the entropic deterioration of the area. Other normals rarely journey there, leaving gaunts to their own affairs in whatever buildings the leatherbacks can keep from tumbling down around their ears. Any gaunt found outside of his district immediately elicits suspicion, since he clearly “doesn’t belong” there.

In the workplace, gaunts are often kept separate from their normal colleagues, both due to the fatigue they incur and the revulsion normals often feel at having to spend time in close proximity to them. Stores and other businesses worry about the state of their merchandise, concerned that too many gaunt customers will affect displayed goods. So they simply bar gaunts from their store, catering to normals only and forcing the leatherbacks to shop in rundown businesses which can’t afford better customers. Public transit will designate gaunts-only cars in order to keep repair bills down and not subject normal riders to undue fatigue. Cabs often refuse to carry gaunts for the same reason. In some cases, the only civil services the gaunts have are those run by fellow gaunts — private bus lines featuring beat-up old jalopies and serving informal stops. The leatherbacks often flock to such services, since they’re inexpensive and don’t treat them as undesirables. All of which only cements the impression that gaunts are “dirty” or “poor trash” in the eyes of normals.

The gaunts’ corrupting aura is their own worst enemy as far as prejudice goes. Not only does it make it harder and more expensive to maintain a decent lifestyle, but it gives normals a very handy excuse to justify overt bigotry. The long-term health threats (as well as the damage to property and the like) are legitimate concerns, leading otherwise open-minded normals to support segregation. More often than not, it simply means that prejudiced normals can keep gaunts in appalling conditions, deny them basic rights and dignities, and prevent them from pursuing better lives. Hate flourishes under the pretext of “the public good.” If you don’t like gaunts — if their looks give you the creeps or their eating habits sicken you — then it’s easy to mask your bigotry under the auspices of health concerns, or worries about the value of your property.

What’s worse, the aura acts to actively facilitate prejudice, encouraging discriminatory thinking where it might not otherwise exist. If most gaunts find themselves living in slums, more people will believe them to be shiftless and poor. If leatherbacks must turn to crime to make ends meet, more people will believe them predisposed towards criminality. It forms a vicious circle which only a few gaunts have been able to break. And it threatens to deteriorate as the ranks of leatherbacks slowly expand.

Gaunts react to this with a combination of grim cynicism and dour acceptance. They ignore stores with “Normals Only” signs in the windows — why would they want to support such a biased business anyway? — while the dearth of jobs for their

## CHAPTER FIVE: GAUNT CHARACTERS

kind makes them happy to find any position at all. Activist groups are slowly rising to challenge segregation through formal laws in the courts (see page 138), but most gaunts still focus on what they need to do to survive, rather than on obtaining the rights and privileges which they deserve.

Prejudice can take more lethal forms than mere segregation. Attacks against gaunts by normals are infrequent, but they do occur. The leatherbacks' superior strength gives them the edge in any fisticuffs, and their tendency to travel in groups means that lone normals never fare well against them. The most prevalent forms of anti-gaunt violence involve unions, who often resent the leatherbacks undercutting their wages. Union thugs will attack gaunt employees during strikes and work stoppages, trying to intimidate the leatherbacks lest they serve as strikebreakers. The unions always travel in large groups and usually carry an assortment of weapons (crowbars, two-by-fours, and the like) to compensate for the gaunts' increased strength. Their targets are very specific, and they try to strike those who are alone and unprotected, but that's not always possible. Conflicts between gaunt and normal laborers have led to some of the worst rioting in the U.C.'s history.

On an individual level, anti-gaunt violence can often turn deadly. A normal hateful enough to attack a gaunt is often hateful enough to kill a gaunt, and a gun is much safer than trying to approach one closely. Gaunts have been shot from moving cars on the street, from sharpshooter positions on rooftops, and from surprise attacks aimed at their backs... all of which protects the attacker's identity. Such violence is rare, but the gaunt community takes it very seriously. Many gaunt criminals have a standing bounty on any normal who shoots a gaunt, and engage in acts of "private justice" in an effort to curtail attacks on their kind. Such efforts often endear them to local law-abiding gaunts (who expect few results from the police).

Because of this, the prejudice which keeps gaunts confined to their slums often cuts both ways. Normals with business in the gaunt districts are treated with suspicion and hostility; why would a normal be there unless he's up to no good? Many gaunts also see it as a tit-for-tat payback: if gaunts aren't welcome in normal areas, then why should normals be made to feel welcome in theirs? Normal service people rarely enter gaunt districts, citing the unwelcome attitude they receive. The police are a particularly hated target, and gaunts will actively shun them if they enter the slums; normal cops sometimes stay out of gaunt districts completely, limiting their presence to a few hasty patrols and the like. (Many police departments have begun hiring gaunt patrolmen as a means of covering gaunt districts, which has alleviated the situation somewhat; see "Gaunts and the Law," to the right, for more.) The only normals who can travel through the districts without being harassed are those of a purely altruistic bent. Fire trucks and ambulances can pass without incident, especially if they're traveling to a location within the district, and various churches and charity organizations are also welcomed with open arms. Normal priests who work in the districts find the residents friendly and open, in stark contrast to the dark looks and dismissive attitude that other visitors receive.

### GAUNTS AND THE LAW

As mentioned above, gaunts have the same rights under the law as any other U.C. citizen. But because of their destitute circumstances and the unspoken discrimination around them, they rarely have the chance to exercise those rights. Many gaunts cannot afford legal counsel, and must either rely on shaky public defenders or defend themselves when accused of a crime. Incarceration often goes hard for gaunts, since they're rarely given the benefit of the doubt once behind bars. The U.C.'s prison system contains a far higher percentage of gaunts than their numbers in the general population indicate, and normal guards — intimidated by the gaunts' greater size and strength — apply brutal tactics to "keep control" of their charges. Police will do much the same, using excessive force to incapacitate a suspect for fear of injury. Gaunts are often brought before the court in unwieldy shackles, and judges have been known to order the restraints kept on even when the leatherback is returned to his cell.

The police face a large problem when confronting the gaunts. Leatherback criminals often flee into the slums to escape persecution; they know the districts much better than the cops, and pursuit into gaunts-only areas is hazardous in the extreme. Gaunts generally distrust the police, seeing them as the instruments of a system which has taken everything from them. The cops often drag their feet when taking calls from gaunt districts, and crimes which affect gaunts are given a low priority in most precincts. When they must enter a gaunt district, they do so in great force — a dangerous situation which has sparked riots more than once in the past.

In order to counteract those trends, police departments have to reach out to the gaunt community, which has always regarded the police with suspicion and mistrust. It doesn't help that most cops deal only with gaunt criminals, and so tend to think of the entire demographic as amoral scum. But without more of an effort to connect with the gaunt community, they cannot cultivate the leads and informants they need to fight gaunt-related crime.

Hiring gaunt police officers has been a step in the right direction. Not only can they patrol gaunt districts with considerably less stress, but gaunt informants are much more willing to speak with a leatherback cop than they would a normal. Many gaunt policemen are driven to serve as an example for others, to offset the image of thugs and criminals unfairly attached to their kind. Departments find that it makes for good PR in gaunt communities, and allows them to better root the leatherback criminal kingpins out of their hiding places.

But there are drawbacks to gaunts in blue as well. For one thing, they don't sit well with the more reactionary normals, who cringe at the thought of leatherbacks in authority positions. Gaunt cops often struggle to gain the respect of the normal community, and find many people willing to confront them even over such mundane activities as traffic direction. Not every gaunt cop is on the up-and-up either; several criminal syndicates have used the opportunity to plant moles into local precincts, who inform them of any trouble. Less compromised gaunt cops can still cause plenty of mischief: alone on their patrols in the districts, they are free to conduct shake-downs or



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

---

even commit crimes themselves, content that no one will ever complain. Finally, the glass ceiling is set quite low for leatherback policemen, meaning that few of them ever rise beyond the rank of sergeant. Gaunt detectives are almost nonexistent and the vast majority must content themselves walking a beat or serving as crowd control for major events. The stark reality of that puts a damper on the number of gaunt recruits. While leatherback cops provide some relief for gaunt/normal relations, they have a long way to go before the problem becomes more manageable.

Similar issues exist when it comes to placing gaunts on trial. Since they don't trust the system, they're sometimes unwilling to play by its rules, and will commit acts detrimental to their case. Gaunts have been known to make inappropriate outbursts during their trials, to threaten juries, and to ignore judges' orders or rulings. Conventional wisdom holds that they're too stupid to know better. In truth, most of them view trials as kangaroo-court formalities: another means of justifying their second-rate status. Their outbursts are one of the only means they have of fighting back. Gaunt defendants are routinely cited for contempt of court, and even those smart enough to keep their mouths shut will quietly decry the process behind closed doors.

Legal representation, too, is atrocious. Lawyers have no more desire to work with gaunts than any other normal, and public defenders will often plea bargain rather than having to go through a trial with a leatherback at their side. Gaunt lawyers are in short supply, and while they will fight much harder for fellow leatherbacks than normals would, judges are much less likely to cut them any slack. The notion of a gaunt judge is almost unheard of; even if barriers were not in place, gaunts simply haven't been around long enough to justify assigning one to the bench.

## Gaunt Private Investigators

The one area of law enforcement where gaunts are thriving is private detecting. Leatherbacks are cunning and resourceful P.I.s, and their numbers in the business are on the rise. Their devoted work ethic makes them dogged and fastidious, and other gaunts with nowhere else to turn can find a ready ally in a gaunt private eye. Some of them even work *pro bono* when it comes to their fellow gaunts: willing to seek out that elusive sense of justice for their downtrodden comrades.

The number of gaunts in detective work may partially be explained by their lack of opportunities in the official police department. Leatherback P.I.s answer to no one and need not jockey for favor. They are free to conduct investigations as they see fit, and are often immersed in cases they couldn't get within twenty miles of as a cop. There's no glass ceiling in P.I. work, no superiors laughing at them behind their backs. There are just the clues and the perpetrator at the other end of them. Private investigation allows gaunts to make a difference in individual lives, something they rarely have a chance to do otherwise. The leatherback community turns to them more readily than the police as well; paying one of their own to help them sits far more comfortably than relying on the whims of a corrupt and uncaring system.

The desire for "private justice," however, places leatherback P.I.s firmly in a moral gray area where investigation slowly becomes mercenary work. Gaunt detectives often find themselves working for revenge as much as justice, hired to "stick it" to some normal who crossed a gaunt with seeming impunity. Some will actively try to counter the police department, seeking to get their client off the hook just as the cops are trying to pin the crime on him. During union disputes, they will be hired to scare up dirt on opposition leaders for use in blackmail — one of the few means gaunts have of keeping the unions off their backs. Criminals, too, will make use of their services, hiring them as investigators in lieu of the police. A gaunt, stigmatized as a criminal from the get-go, can move more easily through underworld circles than a normal, giving gaunt private eyes a considerable leg up during less-than-savory investigations.

The stigma of being a gaunt, however, follows them even if their business is a model of piety. Though gaunts with problems are eager to seek them out, normals will often refuse their services, unwilling to ally themselves with a leatherback, or admit requiring one for aid. Those who do tend to give them only the basest work, convinced that a gaunt could never be upstanding enough to trust with above-the-board investigations. They will, however, hire out gaunt P.I.s for protective and bodyguard work, or even hired muscle if it suits them. Celebrities and the cultural elite love to use gaunts as protection, and private eyes are a more reliable source than outright criminals. Many gaunt P.I.s will happily take the work just to make ends meet, and in some areas "private investigation" is just another term for bodyguarding. Those looking for more legitimate work stick to their own kind, knowing that while other gaunts can't pay much, they can at least provide the dignity of a real investigation. The rest take what they can get, stringing together all manner of assignments and lumping them together under the catchall banner of "detective work."

# GAUNTS AND RELIGION

---

Faith plays a surprisingly large role in the lives of gaunts. Over 65% of them are regular churchgoers and even those who aren't religious ascribe to their own unique spiritual path.

## CATHOLICISM

Roman Catholics — and the Catholic Church in particular — were among the first to hold their hands out to those afflicted with gauntism. They looked upon such unfortunates as the victims of a disease, imparting the same clemency and mercy as they would to a leper or someone stricken with cancer. Catholic hospitals opened their doors to transforming gaunts (though they established separate wings to keep them clear of more sensitive patients), while various orders of nuns busied themselves by soliciting donations and establishing charity organizations.

## CHAPTER FIVE: GAUNT CHARACTERS

As a result, the Church saw a considerable upswing in gaunt converts. Its comfort and aid served as support for newly-turned (and amnesiac) gaunts, and even formed the foundation of their new identity, quickly imparting a sense of values and morality to those who had lost theirs. The Catholic emphasis on symbolism helped assuage the gaunts' need for visible traditions, while the notion of transubstantiation — transformation through Christ — appealed deeply to those who felt their ugly exteriors belied the good souls within.



As a consequence, some 60% of all religious gaunts are practicing Catholics, many devoted to their faith as deeply as any priest or nun. Chapels are created and consecrated from dilapidated structures within gaunt districts, and the Church devotes considerable funds to maintaining them in the face of the leatherbacks' decaying aura. Gaunt Catholics attend Mass at least once a week, and many go more often than that. In the beginning, Mass was celebrated by normal priests (many of whom viewed their duties as one would an assignment to a

leper colony). But as the number of gaunts increased, some of them expressed interest in being ordained themselves, which augmented the few normal priests and nuns afflicted with gauntism who chose to remain in their original profession. Gaunt priests are exclusively assigned to work with their fellow leatherbacks, an arrangement which suits gaunt and normal alike. Most sermons preach patience and quiet strength, urging gaunts to be strong without resorting to hatred for the injustices they have suffered.

Many gaunts become quite active in their local churches: organizing events, engaging in recruiting drives, and reaching out to leatherbacks in prison and other desperate conditions. Under the auspices of the Church, soup kitchens have been opened in gaunt districts, clothing drives and Christmas charities are regular occurrences, and charitable donations to gaunts are now something more than a bad joke. Catholic leaders count themselves at the forefront of the gaunt community, and view their activities as a bulwark against the leatherback criminals who seek (in their minds) to corrupt the gaunts' collective soul.

The steps the Church has taken have not come without a price, however. Normal priests working with gaunts must often endure threats of violence — from gaunts as much as other normals — in retaliation for the work they do. Gaunt rioting sometimes hits churches hard, as Protest Atheists (see the next page) take their frustrations out on the symbols of Catholic authority. And there are those in the Church who view their success with something more than altruism — who see the large number of gaunt converts as a political and financial asset and who have no compunctions about using it. Gaunt parishioners sometimes give more than they can afford to the Church coffers, while political leaders seek to use Catholic influence to sway gaunt voters. Many priests

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

can be convinced to endorse a particular candidate in their sermons with just a few extra dollars in the collection plate. And of course, there are those in the Church who don't believe gaunts should belong, compounding the very prejudice which more enlightened members are trying so hard to dispel.

Against this, more benevolent Catholic leaders struggle to do right by their charges. Gaunts involved in the Church stress self-sufficiency in the community — of Catholicism serving gaunts instead of the other way around — and fight to have their opinions heard among the higher-ups within the Church. As time goes on, the issue of devoutly Catholic gaunts promises more controversy and division... but also some tremendous opportunities as well.

## PROTEST ATHEISM

On the heels of the burgeoning gaunts rights movement (see page 138) comes a new sort of faith — practiced almost exclusively by gaunts and combining a hodge-podge of existentialist musings. Protest Atheism, as it is commonly known, espouses self-reliance and the power of individual change while questioning the tenets of more traditional religion which its practitioners consider obsolete. It has no formal organization — existing more as an abstract philosophy than a material entity — and encompasses several disparate groups bound by similar goals. It is especially popular among the intellectual elite (who disdain the populist leanings of Catholicism), and its growing status as the “alternative” to the Church has ensured a steady stream of new recruits — even those who can't put their faith into formal words.

The tenets of Protest Atheism are nebulous, and vary from group to group. Some organizations refer to them as the Seven Points, though most refuse to codify their philosophy by giving it a formal name. The general beliefs are more or less agreed upon as follows:

1) **The universe is hostile.** God, if He exists, doesn't care for those afflicted with gauntism. He created a world in which gaunts were hated and feared, a world which views them as obscenities and abominations. He does nothing to step in as gaunts are transformed into outcasts and monsters, and their lives become a nightmare of purgatorial suffering. To such a God, gaunts owe nothing.



2) **Structure is corrupt.** Organizations of any sort act to oppress the individual, in that they ask that individual to sacrifice part of himself for the good of the collective. Thus, normal society oppresses gaunts by forcing them into subservient positions utilizing their increased strength without offering any substantive compensation.

3) **All individuals have free will.** If God is indifferent, then every action taken is a result of a choice by an individual. That means that every individual chooses his own fate; the position he is in is dictated by the choices which he — and no one else — has made. In that dynamic lies the capacity for infinite freedom, and thus infinite joy. But so too does free will entail responsibility, for if your choice brings unhappiness or pain, then you have no one to blame but yourself.

4) **Rejecting society is a choice.** One obeys social constructs because one wishes to. If a corrupting structure causes you to suffer, then you can choose to separate yourself from it. In this, the gaunts' very oppression works in their favor, for they can reject society's evils far more easily than normals. The choice to do so must always depend on the individual.

5) **Personal responsibility forms its own moral dynamic.** By accepting and embracing one's responsibility in one's own life, one can actualize a new morality, uniquely suited to the individual and beholden to no external influences.

6) **That dynamic need not be corrupt.** If one acknowledges one's own power to make choices and accept change, then one can choose to embrace benevolence towards the world — even if that world is hostile and unyielding. In so doing, one can set oneself apart from life's inherent corruption, and remain above the hurts and pains that the world might otherwise inflict.

7) **That dynamic can create a better society.** If enough people choose to live moral lives — divorced from the dictates of organization and arrived at person by person — then they will create a new society, free of the entanglements and obligations of the old. Again, gaunts are uniquely suited to realize such a society, since they already stand apart from the existing structure and have the capacity to act with more freedom. They need only accept responsibility for their choices to trump normal life and turn their backs forever on the hurt and pain which it has fostered.

From those basic tenets, gaunt Protest Atheists try to live lives separate from the normals who hate and fear them. They work in jobs which cater to other gaunts rather than normals, and often refuse to accept positions in which they are beholden to normals. At the same time, they try to live benevolent lives, helping others where they can and trying to minimize the pain and suffering they cause others. While they lobby quite hard for gaunts' rights, they do so only in the hopes of letting their

## CHAPTER FIVE: GAUNT CHARACTERS

brethren see what choices are before them, and opting to escape the cycle of hopelessness and despair in which normal society has trapped them.

Naturally, their own philosophy makes recruiting difficult. Protest Atheists disdain complex organization, preferring to work in small groups and effect change on a grassroots level. This explains their fractured nature: dozens of smaller groups are inevitably preferable in their minds to one single organization. Their efforts to promote their philosophy reflect such diverse origins; some engage in overt preaching, while others are content to simply follow Protest Atheism without attempting to persuade others. Nevertheless their message of self-worth in an uncaring universe is quite powerful among the gaunts, and while they are severely outnumbered by Catholics and more traditional religions, their voice is slowly growing louder. Their number is inordinately high among successful leatherbacks, suggesting that the philosophy holds some benefit besides simple spiritual comfort.

Protest Atheism's activities are much more limited than those of the Catholic Church. They sponsor no outreach programs and charity, while commendable in their eyes, also dilutes the sanctity of individual choice. Instead, they seek out domains of intellectual discourse, hoping to sway others through spontaneous debate, or by setting an example for others to emulate. Some preach on street corners. Others host impromptu seminars in gaunt-friendly coffee houses. The majority simply seek to live as best they can; success speaks volumes which mere words cannot. They can often be found in grim working conditions, admonishing the gaunts who struggle there to strive for better things in their lives. This often gets them in trouble with employers, who view them as agitators and have them beaten or threatened (though obviously the gaunt in question is usually strong enough to retaliate in kind).

Their individualist philosophy also causes clashes with the Catholic Church, and with other organizations prominent in gaunt life. Catholic gaunts react very strongly against Protest Atheists, especially those sermonizing outside their church. Fistfights following Mass are not uncommon, especially by those communities most divided by the debate. Gaunt unions (such as they are) are also antagonistic, since Protest Atheism denounces their tactics as exploitative and corrupt. Most normals react to the movement with puzzlement and indifference, but other gaunts — especially those attached to an alternate philosophy — treat them with overt hostility. Protest Atheists must learn to protect themselves from their fellow leatherbacks as much as from normals. It doesn't help that many gaunt criminals are Protest Atheists, using the philosophy to justify their materialism and might-makes-right lifestyles. Some gaunt leaders have even called for a formal ban on the philosophy, a quixotic notion since the movement itself can't even define its parameters.

Despite such obstacles, Protest Atheism continues to thrive, and appears to have enough strength to be a part of the gaunt community for some time to come. For every outraged crusader ranting on street corners, there are dozens of individuals practicing the philosophy quietly and without histrionics. It brings them a spiritual comfort, acknowledging their bleak

lives without surrendering to despair. Though they rarely profess it publicly, most would fight quite fiercely to hold onto their beliefs, and treat efforts to discredit it with unspoken resistance. To say it has divided the gaunt community is something of an overstatement, but one can often tell after a few minutes of conversation which gaunts are Protest Atheists, and which belong to more traditional religions.

### OTHER RELIGIONS

Catholics and Protest Atheists comprise about 85% of the religious leatherback population. The rest belong to any one of a dozen different religions, from Baptist and Lutheran to Orthodox Jewish. Most of them are throwbacks to whatever faith they held originally — remnants of their old life which they continue to cling to in an effort to keep some semblance of their identity intact. Other faiths have not embraced leatherbacks the way Catholics have, however. Though only a few outright bar admittance, most prefer their gaunt members to be invisible and unseen — practicing their faith away from normal parishioners.

Few gaunts attend established churches or synagogues, since their presence can be upsetting to normals trying to pray or listen to sermons. The cost of establishing new churches in gaunt districts is often prohibitive, especially considering that it might service only a handful of faithful at most. Here and there, enough gaunts of the same faith have gathered to support a church of their own; Nova Roma has a pair of gaunt Methodist churches and Paradiso boasts a modest mosque which supports the bulk of the U.C.'s gaunt Muslim population. Gaunts most often turn to more individual means of practicing their faith, holding prayer meetings at their own homes and inviting all those of the same denomination to attend. Compassionate ministers will sometimes come and deliver weekly sermons, tending to the gaunt flock as they would a stray branch on a tree. In other cases, the gaunts are led by one of their own, who speaks to their faith and leads prayers and sermons as well as he or she can. A scant few of these have been recognized by the larger organization, and even ordained as official ministers, rabbis, or clerics.

Unlike Catholicism, which has successfully made gaunts a part of its flock, other religions have an extremely mixed view of leatherbacks. They admire the gaunts' faith and appreciate their willingness to remain true to it, but are leery about spending too many resources on them. Most treat them as charity cases, donating what time and resources they can, but saving the bulk of their attention for normal followers. A few of the most conservative churches are even hostile to gaunts, viewing them as outward expressions of evil. Thankfully, such extreme bigotry is limited to individual preachers and their flocks, rarely rising far enough to become official policy.

In addition to mainstream religion, some gaunts are susceptible to cults and fringe movements. The presence of a charismatic leader can have a huge impact on damaged gaunt psyches, allowing them to embrace all manner of outrageous beliefs in the name of "enlightenment." Paganism and heathen religions are extremely rare, however, though a scant handful can be found in the countryside. The only faith which no



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

gaunt has apparently yet embraced is agnosticism, which runs contrary to the profound changes which the disease inflicts on them. The experience of having one's body twisted into a monstrous and horrifying shape tends to clarify one's views of the universe. They may hate God or deny His existence, but to sit on the fence and say "I don't know" is almost an affront to what they have gone through. Sooner or later, almost every gaunt finds an ethos which he or she can relate to, and pursues it accordingly.

Still, those not adhering to Catholicism or Protest Atheism are in the distinct minority. Moreover, their faith can even add to the sense of alienation and aloneness that every gaunt feels at some time or another. Simply put, there aren't enough gaunts of any one faith to make their numbers worth noticing. But they carry on as best they can, attending to their own services and practicing their faith as close to the established orthodoxy as is possible.

## GAUNT CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE

In general, gaunts adhere to the same cultural tropes as normals. They read the same newspapers, listen to the same music, and engage in the same fads and social movements that normals do. The jobs they hold are similar, if not identical, and the measure of success and failure is no different for a gaunt than it is for anyone else. But that being said, their physical isolation — pressed into slums with little chance of integrating with the normal majority — coupled with the realities of their condition brings a unique quality to their life. Being a gaunt is hard, but it's not altogether unmanageable, and like any culture, it has its share of joys.

## RULES FOR GETTING AHEAD

Though there are no fast, clean rules for law-abiding gaunts to make it in the world, a rough code of sorts has evolved to help them do it. Most gaunts — at least those trying to play by the rules and make what they can of their opportunities — adhere to this code in some form or another.

- 1) **Mind your own business.** Gaunts make a habit out of not prying into others' affairs. Normals don't want their help and tend to view interference as an affront. Many of them will find some way to pin blame on any convenient gaunts — especially one offering to help fix things. Gaunts believe that it's best to just tend to their own affairs and let the rest of the world take care of itself. It keeps them safe and besides, they don't see anyone offering to help with *their* problems, now do they?
- 2) **Watch what you say.** Normals who can't remember their own address can often recall insults and implied insults from a gaunt with crystal clarity. The less one says, then the less one reveals and the less chance of saying something to offend. With so many people looking for a reason

to knock them down, there's no cause to compound the problem by mouthing off. Similarly, knowledge is power, and the less other people know about a gaunt's private affairs, the better.

- 3) **Be loyal to other gaunts.** As a community, gaunts can be very fractious, with various gangs and groups struggling against each other for dominance. But they close ranks like Roman legions at external threats. Getting a gaunt to inform on his fellows is harder than it seems. Better to say nothing, in their opinion, than to make trouble for one of their own — even if it's someone they'd kill in other circumstances.
- 4) **Be smart; don't let your passions get the better of you.** The media has a fixation on gaunt anger and the spectacle of leatherback emotions running amok. This is a dangerous fallacy; gaunts are no more or less temperamental than any other humans. Their outbursts are simply more spectacular, and the pressures they're under mean they lose their temper more often. With yet another strike against them, gaunts admonish each other not to pop their corks. Keep cool, stay calm, and never raise your voice.
- 5) **Be tough.** No one said life as a gaunt was easy, and the world is not interested in hearing about your problems. Gaunts should always be prepared for the worst, and have the ability to shrug it off without a second glance. The more they can resist adversity, the better they can take advantages of those precious few opportunities that life throws at them.
- 6) **Be honorable.** Pay your debts, show up to work on time, and always be true to your word. Stand by what you say and take responsibility for your problems. In short, don't give the rest of the world any reasons to blame you; they can do that plenty well already without you handing them ammunition.

Of course, many of these rules are observed more in the breaking than in the adherence. Gaunts are as varied as any other social groups, and some of them don't care a whit how the rest of the world perceives them. And gaunt criminals are an entirely different breed of cat, creating their own rules rather than adhering to any preconceived notions of "being good." Those who keep to these tents hope that they can guide their people to a better future... or at least keep things manageable today. The rest take note of them, but — like anyone else — use or discard them as convenience dictates.

## FIGHTING THE ROT

The most demanding aspect of gaunt life is simply keeping their surroundings from falling apart around them. Their corrupting aura means that they are constantly plagued with maintenance problems of all varieties. Plumbing sprouts leaks, electrical wiring shorts out, and cars break down on a regular basis. It combines to make the cost of living inordinately high

## CHAPTER FIVE: GAUNT CHARACTERS

for gaunts — ironic, since they rarely have the money to make proper repairs. Instead, they engage in a constant process of patching and jury-rigging, fixing what they can as expediently as possible. Many gaunts are adept scroungers and tinkers; if they weren't, then their dilapidated slums might be in even worse shape than they are. A gaunt who can't produce a piece of pipe he needs or scrounge up a spare part for his car is not highly regarded among his peers.

Gaunt servicemen do exist, and indeed many of them do fairly well for themselves. The demand for plumbers and electricians is high on the construction projects where many gaunts work, and because gaunt tradesmen aren't union, they will work at a cheaper rate than their normal counterparts. Many of them take a section of their pay in spare parts, allowing them to offer some version of their services to their fellow gaunts. The results more or less keep the lights on in gaunt districts and ensure that the constant corrosion they live with can be kept at bay.

Public services, however, are practically nonexistent in gaunt neighborhoods. Streets undergo terrible degradation — especially in northern cities like New Eden, where the winters can be harsh — and city councils lack the inclination and the resources to keep them upgraded. As a result, the streets in gaunt districts are cracked and broken, sporting huge potholes and often lacking proper lanes. In the worst cases, they're nearly impassable, forcing motorists to go around or disembark and walk on foot. Streetlights, sewer lines, and mail service are often in similar condition — intermittent and sometimes completely nonexistent. (Groups of gaunts will often take out a communal mailbox in a nearby post office, rather than trust traditional mail service.) Gaunt communities place a priority on keeping some services up to snuff — fire hydrants, for example, or a working sewer system — and community projects aimed at their maintenance take place on a regular basis. Those services spared such attention go slowly to pot, keeping gaunt districts mired in substandard conditions and ensuring that what little money gaunts make is quickly sucked up just staying ahead of the decay.

### HOSPITALS

Hospitals and medical services are a slightly different proposition. Normal hospitals are often barred to gaunts, who have a detrimental effect on sick patients and on the delicate equipment found in most hospitals. The early solution was to open certain wards for gaunts only: usually areas which had already been set aside for those first suffering from the disease. It made more sense to keep their corrupting influence limited. It was difficult for gaunts suffering from ordinary maladies — say, a broken arm — to view their comrades undergoing the painful transformation process, but in the beginning they had little choice. In time, some hospitals (usually those funded by the Catholic Church) expanded their gaunt wings and provided all number of services for them.

Even with such developments, however, it wasn't enough. With normal hospitals barred, gaunts began crowding into those locations which accepted them as patients, placing a

severe strain on available resources. In the years after the war, many gaunts were turned away even from sites which accepted them, simply because there weren't enough beds or doctors to see them.

But like other elements of gaunt life, a *de facto* solution was eventually implemented. It began a short while ago in Central City. A compassionate doctor named Edna Dumont, who worked almost exclusively with gaunts, realized that the services for her charges were hopelessly inadequate. The hospital where she operated — one of only four available to gaunts in the city — was far away from the gaunt districts, forcing patients to travel a great distance just to receive care. Dr. Dumont reasoned that while she couldn't treat every case that came to them, she could expedite a large number of them if she only shifted focus.

She subsequently resigned her post and made plans to open a new clinic in the gaunt district. She recruited a small staff of nurses (mostly from convents of the Catholic Church) and stocked supplies matching those of a mobile army hospital. Canvas tents would keep out the elements, while the patients could sleep on cots that could be easily folded and moved if the situation called for it. Equipment was minimal and stored in vans for easy movement, keeping it from being overly affected by the gaunts' aura. Everything could be moved with ridiculous ease, allowing it to serve a wide area with comparatively little effort. Though it couldn't handle complex cases such as disease or recurring conditions, it was ideal for trauma victims. Cuts, broken bones, and the like could be stitched up quickly and easily, with very little overhead and a fast turnaround time to boot.

The result was an unqualified success. Gaunts began flocking to Dr. Dumont's jury-rigged hospital, receiving adequate care and alleviating the pressure on more established hospitals. Soon, other organizations began creating similar clinics — operating directly within the gaunt districts and using the same bare minimum of necessities that the first one did. Soon they could be seen in every city in the Commonwealth, and new operations continue to sprout up every day. They can do little for the most serious cases, but the excess traffic they take in removes some of the pressure from more established hospitals. Gaunt hospitals now hold an esteemed place within the districts, on par with those of the Catholic Church.

### VOLUNTEERS

As a consequence of these and other realities, gaunts often rely upon volunteers from their own community to maintain basic services. For example, every gaunt neighborhood has a volunteer fire brigade. Shoddy wiring and dilapidated roofs make the districts extremely susceptible to fires, and though standard firemen are more willing than most public servants to enter gaunt areas, most leatherbacks consider relying upon them too much of a risk. Volunteer fire brigades consist of any able-bodied male with the time and inclination to train; they actually prefer unemployed gaunts, since they are more likely to be in the area if trouble arises. Gaunt firemen maintain equipment as best they can, and often have permission

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

from the city to tap into any hydrants or other water supplies in their district. They also rely on donations of outdated gear from “legitimate” fire departments — which gives them a decidedly rag-tag look, but certainly does the job.

Similarly, with the limited police presence in gaunt districts, many neighborhoods have formed local vigilante groups in order to keep the peace. In some instances, they’re no more than street gangs using “law enforcement” as an excuse to terrorize, but in others, they make a genuine substitute police force — keeping the streets clear of crime and protecting residents from robbery or harm. Of course, it also depends on who you ask; for every resident grateful for their services, there’s another who considers them nothing more than arrogant bullies. The best operate according to strict rules — enforcing certain board dictates, patrolling only select areas, and limiting their duties to citizen’s arrests instead of vigilante justice. The worst are extensions of the local crime syndicate, using their activities to mask extortion operations or keep rivals away from their turf. Most fall somewhere in the middle. It can make politics in the gaunt district very confusing at times, with little on the surface to separate a genuine protective force against a criminal street gang terrorizing the populace. Since the police haven’t traditionally patrolled gaunt districts (see page 127), it doesn’t make much difference to them, but wiser departments have recently realized that their neglect only encourages more gaunts to form vigilante groups. The increase in gaunt hiring and the larger numbers of official gaunt patrolmen on the streets is a direct result of this. The more willing gaunts are to turn to the real police, the less need there will be for vigilante groups and the easier it will be to differentiate those that remain from flat-out criminals.

## GAUNT MONEY AND BUSINESSES

The realities of providing all these services without corresponding amounts of cash have proven an odd problem. However second-hand gaunt amenities may be — infrastructure, public services, etc. — they still require funding, often more than the gaunts normally have. As a result, leatherback communities turn to a modern form of bartering, trading goods and services rather than relying solely on U.C. currency. Canned food and skilled services will be traded with each other in order to keep the neighborhood functioning. A gaunt plumber, for example, will repair a toilet in exchange for several loaves of bread, or a gaunt fire fighter will be treated to a new coat from the grateful residents of the building he saved. It hasn’t supplanted cash currency — gaunts love money as much as anyone else — but it has facilitated the sort of give-and-take that a community needs in order to survive. Many gaunts accept it as a part of life, and will often stock up on needed supplies in order to trade them with their neighbors.

Barring that, gaunts must typically use stores set aside for their kind to get what they need. Higher-end stores refuse to serve gaunts, forcing them to frequent run-down establishments on the edges of their district. Products and services are invariably shoddy, and while some normals might frequent these businesses as well, they usually do so because they have

no other choice. Such businesses are often bought up by those few gaunts with the money to invest, giving them a modicum of financial independence in the process. Some attempt to move higher up the ladder, but the combination of prejudice and operating costs (leatherback aura is hell on one’s product stock) prevents them from rising too high.

The further one gets from the districts, the better the businesses become. Those close to gaunt territory are sparsely furnished and offer limited products, while those more distant are cleaner and entertain a more generous mix of gaunts and normals. Strangely enough, businesses catering to gaunts can rarely be found in the districts themselves. Instead, they cluster around the edges, dominating the run-down neighborhoods which announce the boundaries of leatherback territory. The only exceptions are the underground bars and gambling dens which spring up seemingly overnight in every gaunt neighborhood. They often consist of little more than a few rickety chairs and a box full of liquor bottles, with jury-rigged lights and maybe a makeshift bartop if they’re lucky. Gaunt criminals often run their operations out of such businesses, which can change locations and move around as their owners wish. Gaunts flock to them as one of the few venues for entertainment they can find, spending money they can’t afford for a few hours of booze and cards.

## Gaunt Restaurants

Nowhere is the unspoken segregation between gaunt and normal more apparent than in restaurants catering to the two. Simply put, there are none which serve both gaunts and normals together at once; leatherback eating habits are considered so repugnant that no normal can stand to dine while in their presence. Those few restaurants which handle both kinds of customers carefully mark which section is which, and those who don’t acknowledge the distinction will be thrown out on their ear.

The problem stems from gaunts’ love of raw meat, and the noisy way they often devour it. The sight of a lunch-counter full of gaunts, tearing into strips of uncooked steak like wolves, is enough to put any normal off his appetite for good. Unless they are near construction sites or other areas where large groups of gaunts and normals intermingle, it just doesn’t pay to offer food to both. Gaunts-only restaurants are very easy to run, since almost no cooking is required. Food is served raw; the chef need only season it correctly, attain the proper mixture of ingredients, and arrange it on the plate in a pleasing manner. Ironically, because health codes are unchanged between gaunt and human establishments, running a gaunt establish-



## CHAPTER FIVE: GAUNT CHARACTERS

ment means having equipment on hand that will likely never be used (and which often gets sold under the table the minute the health inspector is out the door). Gaunt establishments are surprisingly clean, since leatherbacks don't like dirty food any more than anyone else. Because they lack the amenities (and demand) to serve fancy dishes, prices can be kept down, and many gaunts who couldn't afford to eat a normal meal out will dine with regularity at their favorite gaunt hangout.

Though food is invariably raw, it can involve quite a variety of flavors, and gaunts-only dishes of surprising complexity have spread in recent years. Gaunts still eat all the meats which normal humans do, the mixture of which can prove immensely pleasing to their palates. Criminal overlords and the few legitimately wealthy gaunts often enjoy beef tartar, and a strange fish dish from the edges of the Golden Empire called sushi. Less affluent gaunts prefer hamburger, or an intoxicating mixture of ground chicken and lamb. Raw eggs are a favorite for breakfast, and vegetables of all varieties are consumed with voracious glee. Spices and seasonings are quite common, and while most gaunt restaurants serve their food with a minimum of presentation, they always make sure that the mixture of flavors is spot-on. Butcher shops often double as delis for poor gaunt clients, serving their shavings out of the back like a vendor at a ballpark.

Many normals are surprised at the sweet tooth most gaunts possess. Their love of butcher shop cuttings doesn't prevent them from enjoying cake, pie, candy bars, and soda, as well as more sophisticated desserts for those who can afford them. All-night diners make a killing serving doughnuts and coffee to gaunts just getting off-shift, while newsstands always keep chocolate in stock to sell their leatherback clients. Restaurant owners looking to keep their gaunt clientele quickly learn the nuances of the leatherback appetite. Those who don't often find their "simple" business falling into decline, unable to discern what their customers want and how to properly give it to them.

### GAUNTS AND ORGANIZED LABOR

It's no secret that labor unions have an open antipathy for gaunt workers. Since gaunts are generally stronger and can work harder than normals, most unions view them as a threat to their membership, pushing good normals out of choice jobs. As a consequence, very few allow gaunts entry, using their clout and influence to bar leatherbacks from all but the most basic jobs.

Owners, on the other hand, see gaunts as a way to break the unions' power over their industry. By hiring gaunts as scabs during strikes, or undercutting union contracts with "off the books" leatherbacks, they can meet their quotas and keep or-

ganized labor from growing too powerful. Of course, it doesn't hurt that an average gaunt can do half again as much work on a given day as any normal, or that they can tolerate dangerous conditions far more readily. Thus, gaunts find their way into employment through surreptitious and underhanded means: acting as strikebreakers, working in non-union operations, or taking jobs defined outside of union parameters but actually performing union work. Many of them accept much lower pay than union normals, and will work without standard benefits such as safety protocols or vacation time. An outfit looking to trim its costs always turns to gaunts to fill their needs.

The gaunts, of course, are aware that they're being exploited, but usually have no choice. They need such jobs to survive, and happily take whatever they can find. They know that normal unions will give them grief, but most consider that the bitter pill they must swallow for steady employment. Their presence marks a slow erosion of union benefits and perks, dragging the labor force slowly down with them. Were they allowed into the unions, it might reverse those trends, but organized labor still refuses to entertain such a notion. The price, they feel, is too high, and besides, most of their members dislike gaunts on general principles.

Despite the continued hiring of gaunts, the unions still have some weapons which they can use. The strike remains a potent threat, especially if gaunt numbers are too small to break it. Shrewd negotiators can point out the damage gaunts cause to a business's infrastructure, or play upon anti-gaunt prejudice, which is no lower in employers than in their workers. And of course, organized crime (with union ties) can make management's job very difficult if they insist on employing gaunt scabs. It's not unusual to see equipment wrecked or a building burned to the ground if a business starts employing too many leatherbacks, and gangland muscle can be used to intimidate gaunt strikebreakers from coming to work.

The trouble is, gaunts aren't easily intimidated. If threatened, they will fight back with characteristic ferocity, and they have organized criminals of their own to offset the thugs attached to union outfits. Labor conflicts involving gaunts often spill over into violent riots, as unions seek to keep the leatherbacks from crossing the picket line while the gaunts fight to hold onto the only decent jobs they can hope to find. Such struggles often reflect larger fights for dominance among the criminal syndicates controlling each side.

A few unions do allow gaunt members — mostly those in which physical labor isn't particularly intensive. The U.C.'s Order of Garment Workers, for example, admits gaunts into their ranks, as does the Union of Hotel and Restaurant Employees. It should come as no surprise, however, that both organizations are deep in the pockets of gaunt gangsters, who use their clout to ensure that their brethren are treated well. They are but a few voices in the wilderness, however; the majority of labor organizations want nothing to do with them. The irony is, by letting gaunts join, they would remove one of management's strongest weapons against them; without leatherback scabs, many businesses would be utterly beholden to labor organizations. Alas, the combination of prejudice and misplaced fear for normal workers means that such insight may be a long time in coming.





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## GAUNT SPORTS AND LEISURE ACTIVITIES

Recreation doesn't come easily for gaunts — the realities of their lives are simply too daunting — but like everyone else, they still find a few precious hours here and there to indulge in leisure activities. Gaunts play cards and dominoes, listen to the radio, and go to the movies just as any U.C. citizen would. The more enlightened ones read (many keenly follow any scientific news about their condition), while a few even paint pictures or work with sculpture. Several gaunt modernists have expressed a unique urban grit in their work which promises to blossom into a legitimate art movement.

Many gaunts are also musically inclined, and the number of gaunt musicians is steadily on the rise. They specialize in blues and gospel — giving a Catholic turn to traditionally Baptist hymns — though some are adept at big band swing and even classical music if the mood takes them. Their ranks are dominated by stringed instrumentalists and drummers, both of which gaunts come into naturally. The best can be found playing the nightclubs of Terminus or Central City, transforming their woes into pure musical epiphany. Gaunt singers exist, but they are much more informal — their hideous looks often quash any professional contracts they might receive. Gaunts don't do well with brass or woodwind instruments — their fanged mouths cause serious problems with playing — though one Central City sax player, Slick Willy Lord, is beginning to make a name for himself.

But out of all the ways for gaunts to spend their spare time, the most dominant by far is sports. Athletic activities allow gaunts to indulge in their natural strengths, and remind them that not everything about their transformation was entirely negative. On the field, they can show themselves just how much they can lift, how fast they can run, and how hard they can compete with their opponents. The stigmata of their condition fall away, leaving physical specimens as graceful and beautiful as any normal. Those who watch gaunts compete are struck by their enthusiasm, their passion, and their unnerving ferocity. It goes without saying that gaunts are bigger, stronger, and faster than their normal counterparts, and the only reason certain athletic records still stand is because the gaunts who broke them are simply not counted.

While they rarely have proper equipment, gaunts never lack for a playing field. The vacant lots and abandoned foundations so prominent in many gaunt districts make for natural athletic facilities, and some locales (like the Coliseum in Gateway, see page 181 of the core rulebook) have actually achieved some measure of notoriety. Here gaunts gather on pleasant days and in the chill of early evening, playing whatever games their local community takes a shine to. Foot races and running events are common, since they can be easily organized and require little in the way of excess trappings. Weightlifting is also popular, though more for local bragging rights than any intrinsic watchability factor.

As far as organized sports go, many gaunt communities have formed impromptu football leagues. The action is herky-jerky and hardly scientific — played on whatever level field they can find — and often officiated by consensus rather than fiat. Yard markers are uneven, field boundaries are marked

by fences and trashcans, and rare is the player who can produce any padding beyond a battered old helmet. But despite the shabby trappings, gaunts take the game very seriously, and their matches often boast an intensity akin to the fiercest university rivalries.

Even more than football, however, baseball is a true and abiding passion among the leatherbacks. Any gaunt strong enough to lift a glove plays in some form or another, whether it be a pick-up game after work or as part of an honest-to-god organized league. Gaunts play baseball with uncanny precision; unlike gaunt football, which revels in its playground aspects, gaunt baseball is obsessed with regulation distances, and if a space can't be set aside to accommodate 90 feet between the base pads, then they just won't play. Some would think that this might pose a problem in the cramped quarters of leatherback district, but such is not the case. Every block or neighborhood, it seems, has found some way to convert spare space into a back-lot field, and while squatters sometimes lay down there for the night, no one ever dreams of building on top of it.

Most neighborhoods support enough players to form at least two or three teams, who play against each other one or two nights a week and swap players casually. The players do their best to emulate uniforms (sometimes no more than swatches of cloth worn as armbands), and umpires are selected from local residents deemed the most impartial. Different neighborhoods will sometimes field teams against each other, though such rivalries can be ugly and lead to off-field fighting. Formal leagues are an emerging way around this, establishing official rules and impartial umpires to referee games. Such leagues make no money — scant uniform and equipment fees are scrounged together by solicited donations — but the leatherbacks have embraced them with boundless enthusiasm, and the baseball on display is breathtaking. In the best cases, it easily matches the Commonwealth League itself.

Many gaunts decry the lack of competition with the normals. Though they love professional baseball and listen whenever they can (in Central City, they're even permitted to attend the games), it irritates them that they can't be allowed to play at the highest level — where no one doubts they would excel. Instead, several gaunt teams have formed which routinely put on exhibition matches, competing against normal teams for the price of bus fare or a few meals at the local diner. These barnstormers live life on the road, eking out a living through ticket sales garnered by their matches — and sales are always booming. From bigoted normals hoping to see the leatherbacks taken down a few notches to baseball purists fascinated with the prospects of gaunt/normal matchups, everyone wants to see what will happen when these teams take the field. In time, this motley collection of quasi-professionalism could evolve into a fully professional league, competing with the C.L.'s Elite Class for fans and revenue.

### Gaunt Boxers

While gaunts are prevented from becoming professional athletes in most sports, one glaring exception stands out. Boxing, with its emphasis on raw physicality and often brutal competi-

## CHAPTER FIVE: GAUNT CHARACTERS



tion, fits in perfectly with the public's preconceptions about gaunts. While leatherbacks in other sports are looked upon as unwelcome intruders, gaunt boxers are embraced with open arms. The Union of Commonwealth Boxing — the U.C.'s official pro league — established a gaunts-only branch in all weight classes shortly after the war. Its ranks were soon flooded with would-be pugilists trying to cash in on the increased strength and durability which their condition gave them. Gaunt boxing matches proved an irresistible draw, pulling in crowds that easily outdrew comparable normal matches. The public thrilled to the gladiatorial spectacle of leatherbacks duking it out; the purse money swelled and the UCB was quick to capitalize on the new sensation. Gaunt champions earned huge fees, and attained the level of fame and recognition reserved for movie stars and national leaders. Almost overnight, boxing became one of the few ways a gaunt could legitimately escape the poverty and squalor of his surroundings.

Gaunt boxing tends to be more savage than normal boxing; though the rules are the same on both sides of the UCB, they are much more loosely enforced during gaunt matches. Blood flies more freely, dirty tricks are willfully overlooked, and conditions which would force the match to be called if the combatants were normals are allowed to continue unabated. Apologists justify it by saying that gaunts are tougher than normals, and so can endure more bitter conditions. The fighters just shrug and accept it; a few even relish the chance to hit a little dirtier. And of course the crowds eat it up, attaining a communal frenzy on par with gladiatorial matches in ancient Rome.

It's a long road to the championship, however. Gaunt fighters must first find someone willing to train them, as well as a manager able to set up a fighting schedule. Theoretically, they must earn the sanction of the UCB as well, though pugilists early in their career often go unsanctioned for quite some time. Most gaunts train at rundown gyms which accept their kind, gathering to work the bags or spar with partners in crude mock-ups of the squared circle. The lucky few get noticed enough to earn a few fights; if they do well, they get sanctioned, their purses increase, and they gain access to better training facilities. The contenders have private trainers and secluded gyms which they alone can use: an unheard-of luxury among the ranks of ordinary gaunts.

Of course, getting to those lofty heights is harder than it looks. As heated as the demand for gaunt boxers is, there are still only so many spots on a line-up card, and many leatherback pugilists find their dreams of glory forever beyond their grasp. Most are just low-rent scrappers, fighting in small locales for a few measly bucks. As their ambitions are slowly blunted, the rage and frustration they feel becomes more apparent in the ring. Low rent fights of has-beens and never-will-bes are often far more brutal than the sweet science exercised by those at the top of the game. The criminal underworld revels in such matches, and syndicates bring in big money by "hosting" the dregs of the sport within their mob-owned nightclubs.

Gaunt/normal boxing matches are strictly forbidden; the only recorded instance of a legal bout ended with the death of the normal boxer, which shut down the prospect for good. However, while the UCB officially forbids it, other organiza-

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

tions are much less scrupulous. Illegal gaunt/normal fights are a highlight of underground fighting clubs, leading to excited betting and bloody spectacles unseen anywhere else. The thought of someone getting killed — presumably whatever hapless normal is desperate enough to step into the ring with a gaunt — is worth the risk of arrest or scandal should word get out. Depraved businessmen pay high sums for private gaunt/normal matches, and some mobsters delight in throwing well-endowed debtors into the ring with some leatherback animal. Ironically, the gaunts themselves often balk at such fights, for they have little to gain in defeating a normal and much to lose if the tables are turned (which happens more often than most laymen think). Those gaunts who consent to step into the ring with a normal are either hopelessly washed-up, or unconscionable sadists.

Despite the seamier realities of the sport, many leatherbacks continue to be drawn to it. As an outlet for their pain and anguish, it is peerless, and even those who don't prosper at it speak to the cathartic effects of a good workout or sparring session. Those at the top of the sport are grateful for the fortune it has brought to them, and try to return the favor by assisting up-and-coming fighters who show promise. Gaunts everywhere feel that their acceptance within the sport represents the first steps to real equality, and revel in the fact that leatherback heavyweights are as well-known (and ostensibly as well-respected) as any normal in the world.

## GAUNT POLITICS

Politically, gaunts walk a thin line between being highly valued and nearly forgotten. Officially, of course, there's nothing to prevent them from voting or running for office. But beyond the odd city council member or two, no gaunt holds an elected position in the Unified Commonwealth. Their numbers simply aren't high enough to elect one of their own without help, and few normals are enlightened enough to seriously consider a leatherback as a candidate. Like most poor and disenfranchised communities, the gaunts received few direct benefits from participating in the electoral process, and the idea that one of their leaders could serve in an elected office is just a forlorn glance through a very real glass ceiling.

That doesn't prevent gaunts from registering in large numbers, however, or from turning to alternative means to exercise their clout. As a voting bloc, gaunts can be quite attractive to the right politician, and when they act in concert, their presence can indeed be felt. Pro-union candidates, for example, are routinely shunned, and those campaigning against such candidates may find the gaunt vote counteracting those from the unions. Reform-minded candidates interested in cleaning up the system often receive the enthusiastic support of leatherbacks, as do those who advocate formal laws protecting gaunt rights. Most gaunts recognize the definite (if small and somewhat shaky) handhold which their voting bloc gives them, and stay registered even if they believe that it won't really change anything.

Politicians on the other side, of course, are happy to use gaunts as scapegoats. Demagoguery has a proud tradition in the U.C., and fearful voters need only look to the nearest

leatherback district to see the alien Other which embodies all of their anxieties. Union-backed candidates speak of gaunts "stealing" jobs from hard-working citizens, while anti-crime politicians like to paint the gaunt districts as hotbeds of corruption and violence. The most radical have even suggested deporting all gaunts to the Borderlands, or forming a gaunts-only province where they can exist away from normals. Gaunt activists have decried such prejudice in the harshest possible terms, but it doesn't prevent opportunistic politicians from laying the blame for all of society's problems at the leatherbacks' feet.

There are, however, more surreptitious ways of exercising power, which gaunt communities have swiftly learned to exploit. Gaunt criminals, for example, gain a great deal of political clout by funneling money towards one particular candidate or another. In exchange, they ask for favors and preferred treatment, gaining through guile what their brethren could never accomplish on their own. While gaunt political appointees tend to raise too many eyebrows, the normal minions of a gaunt crime lord often find themselves holding plum public seats, channeling resources back to their underworld masters. Officials elected with a gaunt criminal's funds often turn their eyes away from the syndicate's activities, ignoring them in favor of persecuting gangland rivals. A few crime lords even have altruistic goals, using their leverage to send more public funds into gaunt districts or quietly lobbying for pro-gaunt reforms. None of it would be possible without first mastering the art of the backroom deal, and gaunts have proven extremely fast learners in that department.

Leatherbacks on the right side of the law lack the resources of their criminal brethren, but their leaders can still deliver a big turnout on election day... and they expect those they support to remember that. Candidates who court the gaunt vote only to renege on their promises once in office can expect to pay a price the next time they run. Leatherbacks have long memories when it comes to being slighted — by politicians in particular. Though they must always take care to whom they give their votes, gaunts refuse to be taken for granted, and when their clout is properly applied, they can make slow but steady progress towards whatever goals they set.

(More on gaunt criminals can be found in the following chapter.)

### Gaunt Activists

While politics is the art of compromise, activism remains forever idealistic — and gaunt lives are too bleak to live without hope for something better. While criminal bosses seize power through guile, and *realpolitik* gaunt leaders seek only a seat at the table, some gaunts refuse to work within the status quo. They reject the notion that others have the right to subjugate them (regardless of how dangerous their condition may be), and work tirelessly for equal treatment for their kind. For them, political action takes on a far more radical form: a battle for equality by any means necessary. They stage protest rallies, encourage the boycott of "bigoted" business institutions, and lobby for honest treatment in property laws (hoping to break the grip of gaunt slums on the leatherback population).

## CHAPTER FIVE: GAUNT CHARACTERS

Gaunt activists usually come from the ranks of the unemployed; the rest are often well-educated, but forced to work in positions which make no use of their intellect. Rather than channel their frustration into violence, they seek out ways to remedy the situation through relatively peaceful means. They meet in bohemian coffee shops and libraries open to their kind, speaking of political philosophy in abstract tones which they seek to transform into pragmatic action. Though some are dismissed as elitist, others are beginning to form a core of leadership around which other gaunts may rally. Their work in blue collar industries gives them a unique contact with the gaunt rank-and-file, meaning that they can connect with the people they wish to help more readily than normal academics. And their burning desire for change is palpable, a potent force in the burgeoning politics of their kind.

Their agenda can be expressed in three words: equality for gaunts. How they arrive at that, however, is a matter of some debate. Their numbers can be roughly divided into two categories, which disagree on how to posit their community in relation to the normals (who vastly outnumber them). Some adopt a "separate but equal" policy, stressing gaunt independence and the ability to create their own institutions. Such gaunts feel that the normal world can no longer aid them, and that gaunts can only depend upon each other. They work for self-reliance: advocating the creation of public services within the gaunt community, pushing to "legitimize" vigilante groups as official policemen, supporting gaunt-owned businesses, and urging their fellow leatherbacks to look away from the normal community when seeking help. The most extreme among their number advocate total separation, seeking to set up gaunts-only communes in the abandoned small towns of the rural Commonwealth. The outer reaches of the Sola Diablo desert have seen the first beginnings of such communities.

Gaunt separatists are also quite active in organizing their own communities against perceived injustices. For example, they have pushed quite hard for the formation of gaunts-only unions, matching the normals in collective bargaining power. They speak out loudly against poor working conditions, and urge their fellow leatherbacks to reject employment if it means putting themselves at increased risk. They are also more likely than their fellows to get involved with gaunt criminals who, corrupt though they may be, are at least self-made men. Finally, they believe quite firmly in renovating the gaunt slums,

turning them into livable housing and fighting the corrupting aura of their kind by any means necessary. They disapprove of normals setting foot in gaunt districts and some have even been violent to those normals who violate "their" territory.

Other gaunts take the exact opposite route. Rather than seeking independence through separation, they wish to more firmly integrate with the normal majority. They seek equal treatment in work and cultural relations, organizing boycotts of discriminatory businesses, and lobbying for new legislation specifically guaranteeing gaunt rights. They also seek aid for gaunts who have taken jobs in the normal community, especially policemen and firemen operating among normals. Integrationist gaunts believe firmly in working through the system rather than trying to set up one of their own. They fight to elect pro-gaunt politicians, and often speak at city councils in defense of their causes. Most believe that if the normal community will only accept more gaunts among their numbers, they'll see that the leatherbacks are nothing to fear and tensions between the two groups will ease.

That doesn't mean that integrationists are weak or believe only in quiet protests, however. Many of them are just as strident as their separatist counterparts, speaking vociferously in defense of their cause and using underhanded tactics with quiet glee. Integrationist boycotts are a sight to see, as the mere presence of several dozen gaunts outside of a store front is enough to keep normal customers away in droves. Integrationists are also masters of the backroom deal, permitting normal politicians to make private concessions rather than risk public stigmata. Any little step, they believe, helps out their cause, and the more they can encourage them, the sooner those steps will grow larger and larger.

Their greatest triumph to date is the integration of the U.C. military, a coup which took several years to fully orchestrate. Gaunts make exceptionally good fighters and while their numbers during the war were limited, their ferocity and aptitude for combat could not be underestimated. The army was quite keen to exploit gaunts' physical abilities, and while they initially considered gaunts-only units, they believed they could mitigate the degradation of supplies and equipment if they spread the leatherbacks' corrupting aura as thinly as they could. Though working with a gaunt was difficult for many normals, the tough guy zeitgeist and gaunts' natural ferocity were able to overcome such prejudice — at least as it related to military affairs. The army is one of the few places where gaunts are accepted with no questions asked, and while they are often assigned to fighting units (with a few partitioned off to research and development), their numbers are slowly appearing in every aspect of military affairs. None of it would have been possible without the efforts of gaunt integrationists lobbying the national government and providing support for those first few gaunt GIs.

Regardless of whether they advocate integration or separation, organization of gaunt activists is largely haphazard. Local groups will focus on their individual communities rather than gaunts as a whole, limiting their gains to a single city or neighborhood. Activist groups are often little more than a few energetic leaders and representatives from their neighborhoods. They lack the numbers to make anything more than a





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

cursory difference. In some cities — Central City in particular — the makings of larger, more coordinated organizations are beginning to take shape. But that may still be years away. In the meantime, gaunt activism makes do with clusters of individual groups: some violent, some peaceful, some well-organized, some little more than mobs of malcontents. The only thing which remains unchanged is their belief that gaunts have been denied a fair shake in this land of opportunity, and that they are no longer willing to sit quietly by and take it.

## GAUNT NPCs

### ROLAND GOLDBERG, GAUNT ACTIVIST

Roland Goldberg adopted the “by any means necessary” philosophy almost as soon as he became a gaunt. When the change overtook him, he first cursed God for robbing him of so much, and then dedicated himself to taking it back however he could. He had been a successful businessman in his previous life, and though the company no longer wished to employ him, he had a decent nest egg built up to support him in his time of need. He turned it towards the issue of gaunts’ rights, intending to establish a national organization of fellow leatherback activists.

Unfortunately, the money didn’t go quite that far. The best he could do was set up a lobbying group in his home town of Nova Roma: solid, but hardly the groundswell of support which his ego had anticipated. Undaunted, he led the newly-christened Gaunt Alliance for Change headlong into the fray. He targeted Praetors and Assemblymen likely to be swayed, and plied them with whatever perks he could. He organized rallies and boycotts, focusing on the city’s least tolerant districts. He found he had a knack for speaking and was soon engaged in numerous public appearances, expounding on the gaunts’ sorry lot and how — one way or another — they would claim the rights as citizens of the Commonwealth which had thus far been denied to them.

His words were often inflammatory, leading some politicians to shy away from him, but where bribes and kickbacks couldn’t find traction, he resorted to dirtier tricks. Blackmail soon became par for the course with him, as did coercion through criminal intimidation (assisted by several mob syndicates who supported his political views). He repaid their help by selling guns to them with funds he had gathered for his cause — the price of doing business, he told himself. (Besides, it’s in keeping with his belief that every gaunt should be well-armed.) In the crime-ridden warrens of the districts, life is cheap, and though normals have come a long way from the attacks and murders of the early days, there’s no telling when normal prejudice will again take an actively dangerous form. He himself is an expert marksman, and carries a large automatic pistol with him wherever he goes. A phalanx of gaunt bodyguards accompanies him as well, ensuring his personal safety from a wide array of real and imagined enemies.

For all his criminal contacts, he truly believes in his cause. Gaunt rights are not just for him, he reasons; if he chose, his money could buy him an approximation of his old life. But what good will it do him if he knows that others out there have suffered as he has? How comfortable can his life be if his fellow gaunts can’t enjoy that comfort as well? He never thinks of himself when he lobbies for new pro-gaunt legislation or has his goon squad threaten a Praetor’s aide. He’s always doing it for gaunts across the nation, fighting to let their voices be heard.

Philosophically, he’s largely an integrationist; the gaunt community is too small and too bereft of resources to stand on its own. That doesn’t mean he believes in free hand-outs, however. He knows that the normal world will always seek to prevent gaunts from exercising their rights, and that to take them back, the leatherbacks will have to work hard for it. Everything he does — from public speeches to criminal deals — he does with that goal in mind. Someday soon, he knows he’ll reach it.

Goldberg has an unusually large mouth for a gaunt, a fact which ironically seems to set people at ease. His wide smile is far less menacing than it could be, and his honeyed voice has a way of making even the most bigoted normal pay attention to it. He’s often angry, but hides it well, his emotions glimpsed only in a clenched jaw or blazing eyes. He dresses in grey suits, often highlighted by a brightly colored tie and a variety of fashionable fedoras. He lives in a small brownstone in the center of Nova Roma, surrounded by the very normals he professes to despise. He takes secret joy in his presence among them; he knows it causes them distress. As things stand now, he is among the vanguard of gaunt leadership, and perhaps the only leatherback who stands a chance of holding high elected office. If any other gaunt harbors such ambitions, he won’t go far without Roland T. Goldberg’s support.

#### Roland Goldberg

**Attributes:** Brains 6, Brawn 7, Build 7, Gut 5, Moxie 8, Smoothness 6.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 35.

**Skills:** Brawl 3, Bureaucracy 8, Etiquette 8, Evasion 7, Fast Talk 7, Firearms 3, Intimidation 6, Perception 4, Streetwise 5.

**Backgrounds:** Charismatic, Gaunt, Prodigy.

**Profession:** Gangster 1, Politician 1, Wealthy 3.

### SISTER MICKEY BONAVENTURE, GAUNT NUN

Michelle Bonaventure isn’t your typical nun. Before finding God, she worked as a mechanic for her New Eden neighborhood, fixing cars and keeping various appliances in good working order. This was in the earliest days of the gaunt community, when the U.C. was still struggling to understand the disease and gaunt districts were little more than protean ghettos. It was hard being a gaunt in those days; lynchings were not unheard of and the sight of passersby recoiling in

## CHAPTER FIVE: GAUNT CHARACTERS

active horror drove many leatherbacks to acts of criminal misanthropy. "Mickey" Bonaventure tasted it all firsthand, but unlike her fellows, she never surrendered to despair. Her work kept her occupied, and allowed her to turn the other cheek to the taunts and stares and hateful anger thrown in her direction.

She disdained the normal trappings of femininity, a rarity among female gaunts. Dressed in her overalls without the wig that other female gaunts wore, she was often mistaken for a male. But her work earned her the respect of the growing number of gaunts in her area. She helped mitigate the damage as their corrupting aura decayed everything around them, and kept their car engines running no matter how extensive the damage. Soon enough, her activities moved to more directly altruistic areas. She helped set up one of the country's first gaunts-only bus lines, and kept the rickety vehicles it used in good repair free of charge.

But it wasn't until the Catholic Church came through her neighborhood — distributing donated clothes and doling out soup — that she felt her real calling. The young priest in charge of the operation spoke with her for hours, despite the obvious effect her condition had on his energy level. She spent several weeks thinking about what he had said before launching inquiries into joining a Franciscan Order of Sisters in suburban New Eden. She remained with them for the next eight years, devoting herself to God and the better works of the Church. It was a difficult process, both for Sister Mickey and for the other members of the Order. Few of them had dealt with a gaunt close-up before, and the Mother Superior entertained numerous concerns about the impact Mickey would have on the Sisters. She never acted on them, considering them a test of both the other nuns' devotion and Mickey's. Those who couldn't endure it were clearly not meant to enter the Order.

Still, it wasn't easy. There were moments when Mickey felt she couldn't go on. The looks of condescending pity that followed her up the stairs, the loneliness and exclusion, the outright scorn which the other women silently heaped upon her... all of it weighed deeply upon her soul. The only thing which kept her going was the knowledge that life on the outside was little better for her kind, and that if she endured this trial, she would have a place in the eyes of God that no one could take away. In the meantime, she maintained her mechanics' skills by working on the Order's bus and traveling sedan, both of which had seen better days. The Mother Superior had no qualms about making the best use of her skills, and often had her keep up other Church vehicles as well.

When her novitiate period ended, she requested a position more active in the community; they sent her back to the city's gaunt districts to serve as an intermediary between the leatherbacks and the Church. She was surprised at how much the neighborhood had changed, both for the better and for the worse. Instead of a despairing collection of outcasts, she now found a new sense of camaraderie and belonging among the gaunts which hadn't existed when she left. But so too did the stifling poverty remain, and the prejudice which she remembered only too well had neither diminished nor softened.

As one of the only gaunt nuns in all of the U.C., her value as a symbol to the gaunt community is invaluable. She's based out of a small homeless shelter run by the priest who first convinced her to enter the Church. From there, she moves in a slow circuit: visiting various congregations in the gaunt districts, listening to their needs and concerns, and reporting what she's learned to her superiors. Through that, the Church hoped to anticipate the needs of their gaunt followers and respond accordingly. Sister Mickey has done a fair amount of good in a very short time there, helping to address the needs of the community and provide assistance to many gaunts in desperate circumstances.

She has found the experience very fulfilling... but also a little troubling as well. Her duties give her access to important men within the Church: men who can be as corrupt as anyone else in positions of power. She's seen deception, lies, cover-ups, and worse sins — all glossed away by the "greater good." In the process, she's had to learn to look the other way most of the time. She values her position, and knows that it could easily be taken from her if she's not careful. Though she has learned many damaging things, she has chosen not to voice them, save to Father Bennett, the priest at the homeless shelter who serves as her confessor. He's helped her bear the burden of her knowledge, and to see that sometimes the greater good demands tolerance of individual evils.

Sister Mickey is a small, stocky gaunt with rough hands and a smile that manages to be pleasing despite her sharpened teeth. She finds her voluminous nun's habit hides her leathery body admirably, and while she isn't ashamed of her gauntism, she's pragmatic enough to recognize the value of concealing it. Her voice is rough, but her words are compassionate, and she can converse with coarse street folk and well-heeled intellectuals with equal ease. She still considers herself a mechanic in some ways, and continues to practice the craft when she has the chance. She's a welcome sight at several local repair shops and sometimes even hides a pair of overalls under her robes. She's also become very used to keeping secrets: other gaunts often reveal their sorrows to her only on condition of anonymity, and the comfort she provides them comes only when she fully respects and honors their trust. It's a way of making up for the darker, uglier secrets she keeps for much more dangerous men.

### Sister Mickey Bonaventure

**Attributes:** Brains 5, Brawn 8, Build 7, Gut 4, Moxie 5, Smoothness 6.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 35.

**Skills:** Brawl 5, Drive (Car, Motorcycle, Truck) 6, Engineering 8, Etiquette 4, Evasion 4, Lore (Theology) 6, Medicine 5, Perception 5, Streetwise 3.

**Backgrounds:** Gaunt, Mean Streets, Wise.

**Profession:** Clergy 2.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## RANDALL "RUGGED" MACREADY, CHAMPION OF THE WORLD (GAUNT HEAVYWEIGHT DIVISION)

Unlike many gaunts, Randall MacReady retains very clear memories of who he used to be: a Central City yardman who boxed on the side for a few extra bucks. He was a petty schmuck and he knew it, his dreams of boxing rapidly fading beneath the repetitive drag of loading and unloading freight.

Then the change took him and gave him a new lease on the future. Specifically, it added fifty pounds of solid muscle and a greater hand-eye coordination than he had ever known. What had been a semi-competent also-ran was suddenly an engine of perfect boxing, a juggernaut that could handily dismantle anything that stepped into the ring with him. He called in a few favors with the then-Petrucci mob (whom he had occasionally assisted with smuggling endeavors in his previous life) and asked for help in getting started. They gave him a manager and set up a string of high-profile fights.

From there, it was a straight shot directly to the title. He defeated the previous champion in front of a packed house at Central City's Campbell Field, taking only three rounds to knock his opponent into rage-fueled oblivion. He's defended his title four times since then, all of them by knockout. His record made him an instant celebrity, not only among his fellow gaunts, but among the normals who thrilled to the silent savagery of his technique.

He fights with clinical detachment, never betraying his churning emotions or allowing his opponents to get to him. His professionalism is belied by a machine-like ferocity to his blows, as if predatory fury were channeled through perfect discipline. It's not only a testament to boxing at its finest, but it fills whoever sees it with an indefinable excitement: the kind that only true champions can evoke.

His rise has not come without controversy, of course. Though his ties with the Petrucci mob vanished with the death of Boss Petrucci, his connection to the underworld is still prominent. Petrucci's successor, Jack Drago, is an unabashed fan and has entertained the champ at his luxurious estate on several occasions. Even more troubling is the only sanctioned gaunt/

normal fight on record, a fight supported by the UCB in a misguided effort at integration. The battle between MacReady and normal heavyweight champ Royal Murdock was touted as the single most important boxing event in history. Bets were off the scale and the purse was rumored to be as high as a million dollars. Everyone believed that it would announce a new era in boxing — a high water mark which nothing else would ever match.

Instead it turned into a nightmare. MacReady killed the man with the first punch he threw, an uppercut to the head that shattered Murdock's skull like an eggshell. Though he was cleared of any criminal wrongdoing (thanks to some heavy-duty legal work) the stigma has never been entirely erased, and many normals — once among his biggest fans — now view him as little more than a caged animal who savages others for public gratification.

MacReady himself looks on it all with a mixture of amusement and contempt. He feels no sense of wrongdoing in the affair, though he was sad to see Murdock killed — the same sadness he would have felt had the normal champion been struck by a car. He knows that the only reason he's been painted in such a light is because he's a gaunt. The hypocrisy of an audience which first demands violent conflict, then blanches when it gets too bloody is not lost on him. He collects his paycheck just the same, and tries to ignore the needling voices in the newspaper and radio that say he should be locked up. They'll be back in his camp and baying all the louder when his next fight comes along.

MacReady is large, even for a gaunt, and his physique has been toned to a perfect amalgamation of musculature and grace. He moves with a natural fluidity, muscles churning beneath his baked gray skin, and his gaunt's eyes are bright and unusually full of life. Never the most erudite of speakers, he nonetheless conveys a remarkable understanding of his sport and its image. He sings the virtues of the squared circle in blunt, honest terms and engages in regular training sessions even when he's not preparing for a fight. Away from the ring, he dresses in finely tailored suits just a tad too loud, and surrounds himself with fellow gaunts. He takes quiet glee in entering businesses normally forbidden to gaunts, only to have the owner reverse gears after learning who his customer is. Though he routinely associates with gangsters, he has yet to participate in any actively criminal enterprise, and will balk if asked to break the law. Though grateful for what the underworld has done for him, he's still a fighter, not a thug.



### Randal l "Rugged" MacReady

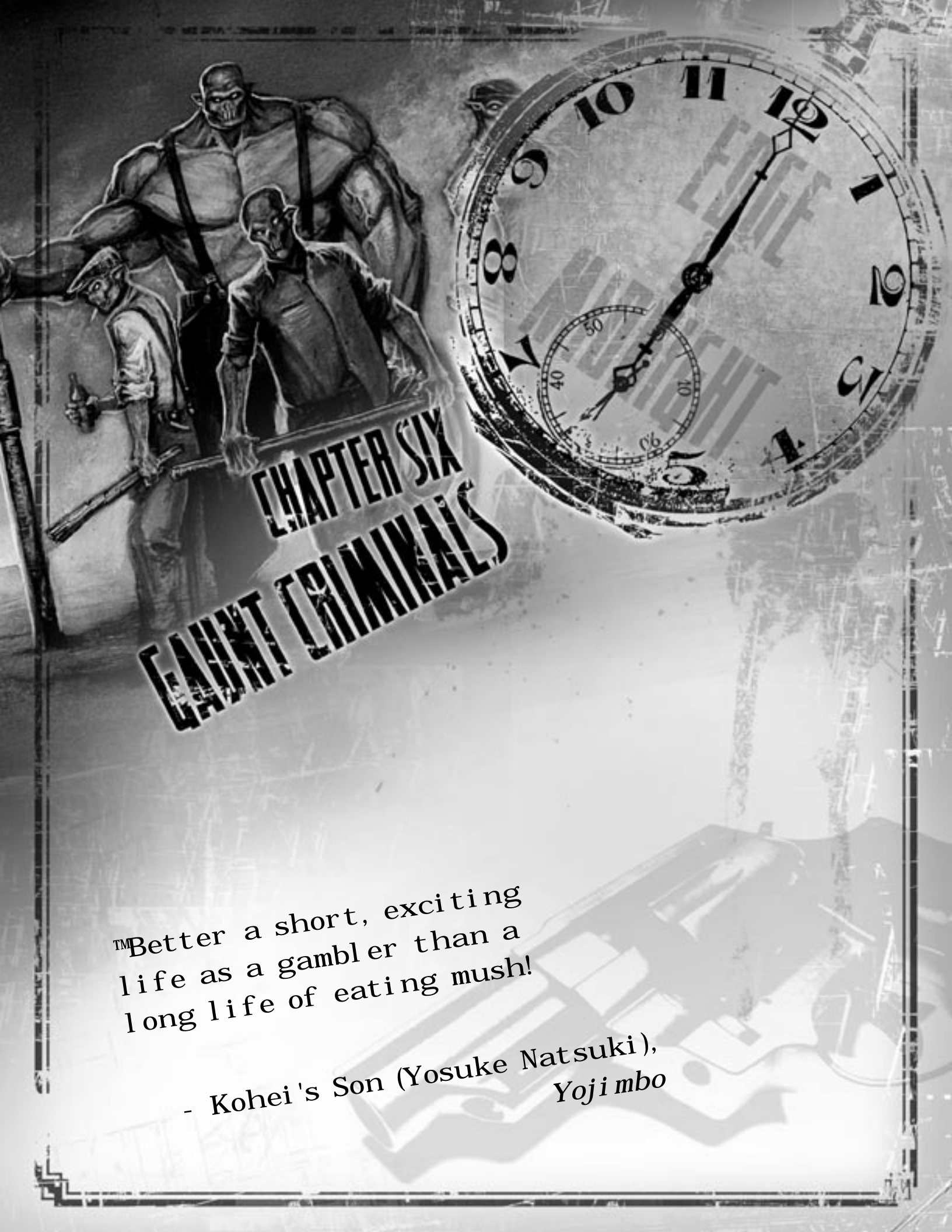
**Attributes:** Brains 4, Brawn 11, Build 10, Gut 8, Moxie 4, Smoothness 8.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 50.

**Skills:** Athletics 7, Brawl 10, Evasion 8, Intimidation 8, Lore (Boxing) 8, Medicine 4, Perception 3, Sport (Long-Distance Running) 6, Streetwise 4, Throwing 6.

**Backgrounds:** Gaunt, Huge, Rugged.

**Profession:** Athlete 5.



## CHAPTER SIX GAUNT CRIMINALS

™ Better a short, exciting  
life as a gambler than a  
long life of eating mush!

- Kohei's Son (Yosuke Natsuki),  
Yojimbo



## GAUNT CRIMINALS

*"The thing is," Augustin Lombard stared icily at the leatherback across the desk from him. "The thing is, Jack, that there's a way to approach this enterprise. We all worked our way up like you did. We know you have to take the gloves off sometimes. But we also know what kind of racket we've built in this town, and how easily it can all fall apart." He gestured to the map behind him. "Central City is ours Jack. We own it, just like we own our cars and our homes. But it only stays that way if no one notices. You go making waves — pushing too hard, reaching for too much, calling press conferences for Chrissake — everything we have goes down the drain."*

*The gaunt looked back at him calmly, a white carnation the sole marking on his pitch-black suit. "Only if we're weak. The syndicates run Central City because people fear us. Once they stop, our trouble has only just begun."*

*"Trouble?!" Lombard's temper snapped. "The only trouble you have to worry about is the kind I make for you! You wanna turn Petrucci's districts into a war zone, that's your business, but you will not threaten my holdings in the process! I've worked too hard to let some upstart sideshow tear it all down!"*

*The gaunt shrugged. "And if I see it differently?"*

*"Don't test me junior," Lombard sneered across the desktop. "Daddy Van Drachenberg isn't here to help you now."*

*"No," the gaunt agreed quietly. "He most certainly is not."*

*He moved so fast that Lombard's bodyguards could scarcely register it before he was upon them. Leaping up from the chair, he buried his clawed fingers deep into the first gunman's chest cavity, pulling something dark and wet from its core. The second bodyguard fumbled for his pistol as the gaunt flung his partner at him like a bowling ball. The two hapless men tumbled into a heap, accompanied by a horrendous cracking noise: the gaunt had held onto the first man's arm, and it stayed in his hand while the rest of the body flew across the room.*

*Lombard gaped in shock as the leatherback turned and launched a piledriving punch across the desk. It connected with the crime lord's nose, sending splinters of blood and bone spraying into the air.*

*"I wonder what would happen if I 'tested' you Augustin." He raked his claws deeply across the old man's chest. "Would you be angry at me? Would you be CROSS?! Would you rap me on the knuckles for my impudence?" Lombard struggled vainly with his coat and produced a small pistol from an interior pocket. The gaunt snatched it out of his hands, then turned to the second bodyguard, who had extracted himself from the gobbling remnants of his partner. The gun blazed, catching the man in the ear as he stumbled forward across the desk. The leatherback caught him by the throat, then wrenched his head around with a second sickening crack.*

*"I'm Jack Drago!" he snarled at the freshly minted corpse. "I do as I will and ask permission from no one — least of all you!" He turned back to Lombard, claws flashing, and began tearing into the old man as he might a freshly roasted chicken.*

*"So maybe I'll just 'test' you, Augustin. Just to see what you'd do. I'm genuinely curious. Please don't hurt me too badly." He continued slashing long after the body in his hands had ceased to resemble anything human.*

*Two more men appeared in the doorway, weapons falling from nerveless hands when they viewed the carnage in front of them. Drago rose, his face framed crimson with blood. Lombard's pistol sat in his hand: not pointed at anything, just hanging delicately like a headsman's axe before the fall. He grinned fanged teeth at them.*

*"Which of you boys wants to get me a towel?"*

(Note that this section covers gaunts who choose crime as a full-bore career or lifestyle — who do it for a living — as opposed to normally upstanding gaunts who stray into crime through impulse or momentary passion.)

Gaunts are not naturally predisposed towards crime any more than any other U.C. citizen. There is nothing in their physical or psychological make-up that anticipates rebellion, moral callousness, or the desire to break society's laws. While they contain their share of bad seeds — those who would turn to a life of crime no matter what the circumstances — the percentage is no higher than it is in the normal population. Had circumstances been otherwise, their maligned reputation as criminals would have no justification whatsoever.

But life for a gaunt is never easy; prejudice and bigotry limit the opportunities they have, while offering nothing but slow suffocating poverty in return. For the most desperate, even getting food is a daily struggle; common household items like dishwashers and refrigerators are impossible luxuries for them. In the face of that, it's seductive to think that laws themselves don't exist... which means that breaking them suddenly isn't a problem anymore.

Gaunt criminals serve as both inspirations and scourges to their community. Some view them as the ultimate rebels, fighting back against a system which has deserted or ignored them. To others, however, they create far more problems than they solve: preying on their own kind and justifying the awful stereotypes which normals associate with gaunts. Certainly, gaunt physique makes them well-suited to criminal endeavors; their increased strength and fearsome appearance become tangible assets, as do less common abilities like the power to see in the dark.

Furthermore, once committed to crime, gaunts demonstrate an uncanny enthusiasm for it. It is one of the few areas where their kind is actually rewarded for hard work; indeed, success is limited only by the opportunities a criminal makes and the ruthlessness he's willing to employ. The only real impediment is the inherent morals of the individual, and when that goes out the window — when the gaunt feels, for whatever reason, that right and wrong no longer apply to him — then the sky's the limit.

In the space of a few short years, gaunt criminals have gone from a few freakish underlings to a raging force in the U.C.'s underworld. Their gangs are among the strongest and most vicious in the country. Their syndicates have their fingers in every conceivable form of illicit activity. Gaunt hit men are

## CHAPTER SIX: GAUNT CRIMINALS

among the highest paid in their profession while mobsters like Jack Drago are afforded a status akin to movie stars. Their success is due, at least in part, to the prejudice leveled against them. When elected officials and law enforcement ignore a large section of the population — crowding them into unpoliced slums, refusing to protect them from exploitation, etc. — it creates a sense of inherent lawlessness within the community. Without that structure in place, “might makes right” becomes the rule. Simply put, gaunt criminals flourish because they can, and the vast majority of law-abiding leatherbacks can do little to change that. Some police departments have recognized the problem, and attempted to address it by increasing their activities in gaunt neighborhoods, but their negligence has given the underworld a big head start.

For aspiring criminals, gauntism can be something of a two-edged sword. On the one hand, they tend to stand out in a crowd, limiting the anonymity which allows them to strike without warning. On the other hand, few normals can distinguish between gaunts beyond the most elementary characteristics, giving them an excellent natural disguise for purposes of identification. They may be able to spot a leatherback getting ready to rob a bank, but will struggle to pull him out of a line-up after the dust has settled. Gaunts who learn to melt into the crowd are among the best criminals in the world, making excellent use of all their assets while succumbing to none

of the defects. And gaunt criminality is still in its infancy; as time goes on and leatherback culture becomes stronger and more solidified, it is apt to produce new criminals who make the current batch look like slow-minded amateurs.

### MOTIVATION

So what, specifically, drives a gaunt to a life of crime? Poverty and prejudice play a big part, but all gaunts must labor under such burdens. Below is a list of possible justifications for entering a life of crime. Most gaunts — indeed, most criminals in general — don’t evince just one justification, but rather a combination of several, depending on the particular personality. They can be used as the foundation of a gaunt criminal character, providing some reason as to why he is the way he is and making him more than just a two-dimensional thug.

### Protection

Life in the gaunt districts can be dangerous, with violence and beatings a matter of everyday concern. It can be just as dangerous outside the districts, as the hate and fear of the normals spawns all manner of cruelty. Riots are not uncommon, and entire gaunt neighborhoods clash with each other over matters both important and mundane. Gaunt gangs will prey on lone individuals without hesitation, and even the police are



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

not to be trusted. In such circumstances, it's only natural to find a strong organization to help protect you and yours. Criminal syndicates offer safety to their members, and even smaller gangs have the numbers to stave off immediate attacks. In exchange, the gaunt will have to contribute, either by sticking up for his fellows or (usually) by committing crimes himself. Leatherbacks driven to such circumstances have few qualms about preying on others. The world is a jungle, and if you don't fight back, you're going to get eaten alive. The umbrella of a large organization may be the only way guarantee your safety — especially if you're a gaunt.

This is particularly true for gaunts who join large criminal organizations — normal-run syndicates with roots stretching back before the war. The better established a syndicate is, the more security it's likely to offer, and many human mobs relish the addition of a little leatherback muscle on their side. Many gaunts also justify the money they make as a form of protection: a hit man who saves his earnings can afford to buy a house far away from the horrors of the gaunt district. Ironically, he commits terrible crimes in order to escape the need to commit terrible crimes.

## Belonging

Peer pressure is no less intense for gaunts than it is for any other demographic. Indeed, it's often an overpowering force in these early days as the fragile gaunt culture struggles for cohesion. Gaunt life is often clustered around small clans or extended "families" (see page 125), which can easily morph into a vicious street gang or eventually a syndicate unto themselves. After having lost so much — family, friends, security, identity — in their transformation, most gaunts cling to new friends like a drowning man clutching a straw. And if those friends are motivated to commit crimes, the gaunt is obligated to participate as well.

This form of motivation is especially strong in gaunt petty crooks — street gangs who commit muggings and purse snatchings or more established groups who stem from a common background. The validation and acceptance of their peers (often mutually reinforced) creates a climate where the group makes up its own rules of right and wrong. Loyalty is stressed over practicality; betrayal of the collective is the only mortal

sin. And when one member feels guilty for the things he has done, he mitigates it by pressuring his comrades to commit similar acts and join him. For small criminal groups who work together over long periods of time, a strong sense of belonging gives them more of an identity than they could ever hope to compile on their own.

## Revenge

You can only be hit so many times before you start hitting back... and gaunts get hit a lot. The ranks of leatherback criminals are filled with those carrying building-sized chips on their shoulder, angry at the world and ready to start collecting payback. What better way to do it than knocking over a normals-only bank, or extorting every penny out of storekeepers who wouldn't give a gaunt a glass of water if his shirt were on fire?

This sort of motivation produces mainly hotheads — thrill-seeking criminals who act on impulse and revel in the brutality which they cause. Bank robbery and store hold-ups are an especially favorite pastime, since it gives them a feeling of power and control that feeds their wounded egos. Violence comes easily to them: casual assaults fueled by adrenaline and directed at those who can't fight back. They rarely last long. Their emotions often lead to sloppy tactics and easy identification, and their behavior invariably draws the attention of the police, who waste no time in hunting them down. Syndicates use them for simple muscle work, or unleash them when they need a distraction. Otherwise, their careers tend to be exciting, spectacular, and very, very short.

For some gaunts, however, revenge is a much colder and more calculated equation. They think before they act, reasoning that getting killed does nothing to even the scales. Instead, they move with meticulous caution, acting only when it will cause great damage or further some larger scheme. These tend to be the most dangerous gaunt criminals imaginable, especially when their revenge is directed at society as a whole rather than at small parts of it. They rise through the ranks of organized crime very quickly, parlaying their combination of ruthlessness and preplanning into excellent leadership skills. Their crimes erode public trust in established institutions, baffling the police and humiliating the powers that be. They front political bosses who spread corruption like cancer, turning democracy into a hollow sham and looting the taxpayers' hard-earned money like a child's piggy bank. And their motivations are uncluttered by mercy or remorse; they collect their pound of flesh from the world bit by agonizing bit. Among the criminal underworld, the gaunts who fall into this category are truly forces to be feared.

In some cases, the gaunt's revenge is centered around an individual, rather than larger social forces or an impersonal entity like the police. If they can exact reparations quickly, then they rarely continue along a criminal path; murdering a cheating ex-lover or robbing a recalcitrant business partner is a one-time act, and conducting crimes against other targets simply doesn't make any sense. Sometimes, however, the target is sufficiently entrenched or powerful to make revenge a long-term goal. A popular mayor, for example, won't be dethroned by a robbery or two, and a ruling crime boss may take



## CHAPTER SIX: GAUNT CRIMINALS

### GAUNTS AND WARLOCKS

It's no secret that magic is particularly harmful to gaunts, who suffer sharp pain whenever sorcery is used in their presence. It's also no secret that gaunts and warlocks often rub shoulders in the U.C. underworld: gaunts forced to by economic necessity, warlocks because the magic at the center of their existence has been outlawed by the Unified Commonwealth. Needless to say, it's a recipe for disaster. Leatherbacks are acutely aware of their weakness to magic, which an enterprising warlock can exploit to his advantage.

Furthermore, the two sides have no wish to retreat from the one social niche available to them, and refuse to surrender the criminal underworld to yet another band of oppressors. To gaunts, warlocks are encroaching on the one piece of territory which they feel they own, while presenting a real and tangible threat that they cannot easily counter. As a result, gaunt criminals react very harshly to warlocks in their midst, and entire syndicates have gone to war just because the leatherback in charge views the merest presence of some magic-user as a threat that cannot be ignored.

Warlocks, for their part, have nothing in principle against gaunts. Many of them may be biased or prejudiced, but no more so than any other normal. However, they too feel that the underworld is the only part of society which accepts them for who they are. Magic addiction runs strong within their veins; they could no more stop practicing sorcery than they could stop breathing. Other criminals value their spectacular powers and pay them well, which allows them to continue their pseudo-scientific research. As covered in the *Edge of Midnight* core rulebook, normal gangs fearful of being subjugated by stronger, more powerful gaunts will use warlocks to help even the scales. As long as the rest of society persecutes them, warlocks need such support as much as gaunts do. They're not willing to turn tail just because their work gives the leatherbacks pause.

In addition, criminally-inclined warlocks are apt to use their magic to maximum advantage when confronted with gaunt opposition. It's a sign of just how powerful their magic can be: who wouldn't feel an adrenaline rush as a colossal leatherback collapses in agony because of few muttered mathematical formulae? Warlocks view that as the only edge they have on leatherbacks, and are thus prone to use it as often as they can. The smarter ones keep it in reserve, hiding their powers until they need them, but the nature of magic addiction is such that few can hold out without flashing their abilities at least a little bit. The gaunts' natural hostility towards warlocks makes them especially nervous; many otherwise mild-mannered warlocks will immediately treat leatherbacks as the enemy, anticipating some outburst or attack which may or may not come. They tend to shoot first and ask questions later, hoping to keep the gaunts "in their place" before some leatherback decides to kill them on general principles. (Some police departments have picked up similar habits, and will occasionally use members of the crystal ball squad during the arrest and/or transport of prominent gaunt criminals.)

The division between gaunt and warlock is a major factor in the U.C. underworld. Criminal gangs on either side which have no other reason to fall into conflict will tear at each others' throats, battling to the death merely because they share the same city. Warlock hit men will actively lobby for gaunt targets, eager to earn extra capital by taking down the "unstoppable" leatherbacks. Gaunt crime lords will often turn their puppets against the "scourge" of magic in their midst, manipulating politicians into launching crusades against the local warlocks. In a few cases, repeated clashes have led to tentative peace, with both sides affording each other enough respect to get by. But they are far more the exception than the rule; most of the time, dominance by attrition is the order of the day.

decades to bring down. In such cases, crime becomes a long-term means of facilitating revenge. The gaunt will form a rival gang to challenge the crime lord, for example, or make the mayor's job untenable by spreading lawlessness throughout the city. Finances are obtained through robbery and extortion, which fund more direct assaults. The process can take years — certainly the length of an entire campaign — and indeed, it may be some time before the gaunt can even present himself as a legitimate threat. Again, the process requires a cold and calculating mind: patient enough to defer gratification until it can be properly enjoyed.

#### Greed

For many gaunt criminals, motivation remains the same as normal criminals. They just want a lot of money, and they want it now. Greed is a fundamental driving force in almost every form of crime, and few endeavors allow you to make so much

so quickly if you approach it right. Organized mobs are among the most successful businesses in the country, easily outstripping their legitimate counterparts. Even the petty crooks, who are limited to the odd mugging or hold-up, do so because they consider it easier to make money that way than to sweat out a thankless job for peanuts. All you need is the will to threaten, harm, or deceive someone else, and the lack of moral compunctions to feel guilty about it.

The greed of gaunt criminals is often accentuated by the staggering poverty in which they find themselves. They first see crime simply as a way of making ends meet — a survival tool as necessary as food or water. They dream of comfort and ease, of a life where monetary concerns are a thing of the past. Once they have a little, they want a little more... and a little more... and a little more. Eventually, they have surpassed the dreams of avarice, and their crimes are just an excuse to main-



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

tain their extravagant lifestyle. Of course, many gaunts never get that far on the path: they're cut down or imprisoned long before then. But the avarice that drives them along remains undiminished all the way up until their final days.

## Justice

In many ways, justice is fueled by the same social discrepancies which fuel revenge. The gaunt experiences oppression, hatred, and indifference to his plight. He watches the world pass him over or worse — outright persecute him for the misfortune of being who he is. He sees an entire community living

in squalor while rich normals flaunt the excesses of wealth, and a system designed to keep the have-nots forever beholden to the haves. Crime for such gaunts is both a means of fighting back and a way to balance the scales of inequity. If everyone else simply takes what they want, then why can't he?

Some of them view themselves as saviors of the streets, stealing from those in power and redistributing the wealth to their needy gaunt brethren. Of course, they keep most of the profits for themselves — after all, aren't they poor too? — but their false altruism becomes a key part of their *modus operandi*. They often target prejudicial businesses, or individuals whose anti-gaunt bias is readily apparent. They try to avoid conflicts with fellow gaunt gangs, concentrating instead on their so-called oppressors. Many gaunt gangsters endeavor to earn the good will of their fellows by sponsoring food drives, or giving generously to the residents of the local slums. Cynics will say they do so only to curry favor with other gaunts (and they would probably be right), but it doesn't change the attitude which drives such displays.

Other gaunts use more subtle means to achieve the justice they desire. Their crimes are geared towards shining a spotlight on the corruption of others, using illegal means to expose far worse deeds. For example, the gaunt could find and raid a politician's slush fund, removing his illegal monies and forcing him to either keep quiet about it or expose himself to public scrutiny. Or a gaunt gang could arrange for a series of robberies of the rich and famous, engineered to frame other, more ruthless criminals for the deed. The outcry and resultant crackdown would bring heaps of trouble to the gaunts' rivals while still depriving the wealthy of their not-so-hard-earned cash. That the gaunts themselves still prosper from this endeavor is less important to them than making the unjust pay for their wickedness — an irony that they rarely fail to relish. Such criminals are more likely than any others to adhere to a code of ethics, and to pick their victims with an eye for whether or not they deserve it. The lines they draw may be fine and easily moved, but they are still lines, and gaunts with this motivation cling to them as the only thing which lifts them above the remainder of the criminal underworld.

## GAUNTS IN THE BIG HOUSE

The U.C.'s prison system quickly became a breeding ground for up-and-coming gaunt mobsters. Leatherback criminals, when caught and convicted, were placed in the general prison population, rather than segregating them in their own section (people worried less about the health risks to convicted felons than they did law-abiding citizens). The atmosphere proved ideal for honing criminal instincts among the leatherbacks. Their greater strength and savagery often led them to dominate any rivals. Lone gaunts were an easy target for attacks, but they soon gathered together for mutual protection and formed power blocs which could not be easily countered. They would seize control of illicit activities such as smuggling, and kill or intimidate any rivals who dared oppose them. Those ruthless enough to fight back could set them on their heels, but it took an effort and sometimes backing from outside the prison walls. For a brief period, several prisons were practically feudal kingdoms run by leatherback gangs. They would even cut backroom deals with the guards, enforcing a rough order on particularly unruly prisons in exchange for favorable treatment.

The process accelerated their learning curve, transforming them into hardened professionals almost overnight. When their members were released, they were better able to navigate the criminal underworld, and many rose to powerful positions based on the lessons they had learned (and the friends they had made) while inside. Many gaunt gangs which formed in prison emerged as forces to be reckoned with on the outside, maintaining ties with each other, and using their camaraderie to chisel out a niche within the U.C. underworld. They helped those still behind bars by providing contraband and threatening the families of troublesome fellow inmates. In return, they expected the beneficiary to come and work with them once he got out. The combination has produced some very strong gaunt criminal syndicates, many of whom would not have existed had their members not been through the prison system.

More on gaunts in prison can be found in Chapter Four.

## TYPES OF GAUNT CRIMINAL

This section contains a brief overview of gaunt criminal types (matching those covered in the first section of this book), as well as tips for playing gaunt characters in that vein.

### STREET GANGS

Every city has gaunt street gangs — bands of petty criminals who prowl the night in search of victims. They dominate life in the slums and have been known to frequent areas outside of the gaunt districts when the mood takes them. Some of them have survived long enough to become more than just a gang, transforming their operations into a genuine criminal syndicate. But most never rise beyond the street level:

## CHAPTER SIX: GAUNT CRIMINALS

conducting various small-time schemes, tangling with other gangs, and bouncing in and out of prison. Though the public thinks of gaunt crooks as wealthy mobsters like Jack Drago, the majority of leatherbacks fall into this far less glamorous category.

Gaunt gangs are usually formed the same way gaunt extended families are. They average about ten to twenty leatherback members, though some can be as large as one hundred. A newly transformed leatherback, recently thrust into the crucible of the slums, is taken in by an older, wiser gaunt who helps him with the transition. In the case of a gang, this leader is actively engaged in a criminal enterprise, using the new recruits he finds as foot soldiers in his mob. The new gaunt, confused and frightened by his sudden transformation, is often eager to conform and soon leaves whatever moral objections he may have behind. His newfound comrades are the only thing to which he can still cling. Better to survive as a criminal than to die alone in the forgotten hovels of the gaunt district.

However, the vicious necessity which often prompts joining a gang has a noticeable side effect, which separates the gangs from more law-abiding gaunt groups. The loyalty they inspire in one another comes more from fear than from friendship, and thus is more apt to be abandoned when things become difficult. This doesn't mean, however, that they abandon the gang itself. Rather, their camaraderie devolves into a Darwinistic form of pack mentality, where the strongest and fiercest gaunt is inevitably in charge. Leadership is maintained through a constant process of proving — of perceived power backed up by the leader's physical prowess. He's in charge as long as the others think he's in charge; when a rival challenges him for dominance, he has to respond to it or else risk losing his position.

Simultaneously, the gaunts beneath him jockey for prominence, establishing a rough hierarchy within the gang. The gang leader isn't immune to this process, and every now and then a rank-and-file member will challenge his superior for the right to lead. Conflicts are usually resolved through non-lethal but extremely brutal fights, in which the combatants square off in a ring of fellow gang members. It's not unusual to see gaunt thugs sporting vicious scars and even a lost eye or ear as a result of one of these fights. The losers are not ejected from the gang, but they suffer a considerable loss of face, and the other gang members will treat them accordingly. It leads to an atmosphere of surface loyalty covering up a seething caldron of recrimination and resentment. The resulting imbalance renders many gaunt street gangs unstable and volatile, experiencing a rapid turnover in overall leadership and often breaking up into two or more smaller gangs. The most stable ones achieve a basic equality — with either a charismatic leader who everyone respects or a more democratic process created by genuine loyalty and fellowship. The latter is unusual in the ranks of gaunt street gangs, but hardly unheard of.



Regardless of their internal politics, however, every street gang will unite in the face of a common foe. Police looking to find someone willing to inform on their fellow members often run into a brick wall, as the distrustful gaunts refuse to give up one of their own. Many gang members will endure stints in prison and other hardships for the sake of their comrades — even comrades whom they hate or fear. The currency which their silence buys is almost without price when they get out of the joint. Similar loyalty can be found when it comes to other gaunt gangs; defections from one gang to another are rare, and known members of a given gang are viewed with extreme suspicion when they show up looking to join another. Gangs which splinter have been known to engage in lethal clashes, but even then, they do so only when no other threats are present.

Despite the clear-cut divisions between different leatherback gangs, the politics of a given area can be quite confusing. The boundaries between one gang's turf and another's are constantly shifting, and vary based on who you ask. Alliances and rivalries change on a whim; an enemy gang one week may be a friend the next. And general gaunt loyalty crosses gang lines, making it hard for normals to determine which group is currently at odds with which. Furthermore many so-called "gangs" are simply vigilante groups trying to protect their neighborhoods... and more than a few self-styled vigilantes are just small-time hoods with pretensions of legitimacy. It all makes quite a mess, and police reluctance to add gaunts to their ranks has only furthered their isolation to the problem. The recent addition of gaunt patrolmen has made some results in cracking the gangs' united fronts, but the going is slow and is hampered by the small number of gaunts in the nation's police force.

Street gangs tend to participate in the most immediate forms of petty crime. They strike targets of opportunity, often with little pre-planning and only a modicum of thought involved. Muggings and purse snatchings are their standard fare; they frequent crowded locales and areas where the police must watch a large number of people. Places with a lot of exits are ideal, such as large train stations or central thoroughfares on city streets. They rely on fear and intimidation during such street-level hold-ups, using their fearsome features to scare the target into giving up his or her valuables. Many pride themselves on never using a weapon for such crimes — one looked at their fanged teeth is enough to convince most victims to cooperate. After a time, they become very good at selecting victims: those who look prosperous or well-off, of course, but also those traveling alone, those who seem distracted or unaware of their surroundings, and those who can be easily bullied. They will stake out preferred positions, scattered slightly so that they can triangulate upon their victims. Usually a scout or runner will venture out into the thoroughfare to serve as a spotter, then return to the group to mark their next target. A smart gang maintains numerous locations to play out their crimes, making it harder for law enforcement to establish a bead on them.

Shoplifting is another common practice among gaunt gangs, though they approach it with a little more forethought. Because they are limited to non-segregated businesses, most gangs quickly learn how to make the most of their opportu-

## GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

nities, which means they must think before they act. They will often spend a few hours casing out a business: spotting guards, figuring out exit routes, and observing the flow of customers. Gaunt thieves are very skilled at diversionary tactics in these situations. One or two gang members will create a distraction by “accidentally” knocking something over, frightening a customer into shrieking, or the like. A partner will then boost the goods and get away clean, unobserved by either the store employees or the other customers. They usually trade whatever they steal for food or other essentials; similarly, they often target staple items like clothes and utensils. Cash is a secondary bonus, but this form of theft is often a survival tool, not a means to easy wealth. More on shoplifting can be found on page 40.

Armed robberies utilize a certain amount of planning as well, though certainly not as much as a more professional thief uses. As with shoplifting, gangs focus on easy targets with low security and a lot of possible exits. Retail stores which carry a lot of cash are preferred, as are isolated locales such as gas stations and roadside cafes (unlike shoplifting, it doesn't pay to have a lot of customers present). They particularly like businesses which cater to normals only. Besides the sense of payback it conveys, the sudden appearance of half a dozen gaunts brandishing guns and shouting at the top of their lungs has a devastating effect on those unused to leatherbacks in their midst.

As with any snatch-and-grab robbery, speed is of the essence. Since few gaunt gangs have access to an automobile, they usually scatter upon leaving the scene in hopes of confounding any pursuers. They meet back up at a prearranged location to divide the money (which rarely rises above \$500 or so). Banks and other institutions are usually too risky for gaunt street gangs; the higher security and greater chance of being caught aren't worth it, and their organizational skills lack the sophistication to overcome a vault or similar measures.

Recently, gaunt street gangs have begun tapping into the growing drug market, an industry which earns far more money than any of their other criminal endeavors. The gaunt districts are overwhelmed with despair,

which the gangs take advantage of by selling heroin or other narcotics to their fellow gaunts. The practice is not without risk. Other gaunts take a dim view of pumping their ranks with poison, and vigilantes often target drug dealers before any other form of criminal. Though the money is good, competition from other gangs is cutthroat, and promotes violence where previously none existed. Finally, since gaunt gangs are such a recent phenomenon, they still lack the connections to make deals on a large scale, leaving them beholden to large syndicates and established criminals who can smuggle the narcotics across the border. Street gangs hoping to bring in more funds through this growing market are often shut down by higher-ups... or simply wiped out for their presumption.



## CHAPTER SIX: GAUNT CRIMINALS

Indeed in order to get by at all, many street gangs must pay protection to larger mobs. They turn over a cut of their profits to the local capo, and in exchange, earn the right to exist. In some cases, they'll also earn the right to frequent a low-key mob hang-out, such as a bar or pool hall, though they're kept far away from "official" mobsters. They'll also gain a modicum of genuine protection, as rival criminals learn to keep a respectful distance. Beyond that, however, they remain firmly on the bottom rung of the criminal ladder: beholden to their "betters" and getting by on whatever penny-ante schemes their masters permit. Like everything else with the gaunts, it's simply a matter of survival; the gangs pay homage to the large organizations above them because they have no other choice.

### GAUNT MOBSTERS

If street gangs are the paupers of the gaunt criminal class, then mobsters are its ruling elite. They are wealthier than most gaunts dare dream about and more feared than the most powerful politicians. They rule the underworld like feudal kings, enforcing their will with gunfire and blood. Their meteoric rise to prominence has cemented their image in the public consciousness — celebrity criminals, who pulled themselves up from poverty to grab the world by the fundamentals. If the leatherbacks are seeking equality and prosperity, these are thus far the only figures they can look to: a twisted distortion of self-made success.

Gaunt-run mobs are a fairly recent phenomenon. While normal gangsters have been entrenched for decades (or at least appear to be so) within the Commonwealth's cities, gaunt criminals largely didn't exist until the end of the war. They've been making up for lost ground, however, through a combination of ferocity and cunning which has led to their growing dominance within the U.C. underworld. Though the powers that be on both sides of the law acknowledge the problem, many believe it to be only a passing phenomenon — that gaunt mobsters will vanish just as quickly as they appeared, returning to the slums which spawned them. This is a dangerously short-sighted viewpoint, however, which has led to more than a few normal crime lords losing their position to leatherbacks they dismissed as a flash in the pan.

Gaunt-controlled mobs arise under two specific circumstances. First, a lower-echelon street gang can become large enough and sophisticated enough to take on the more complex schemes that define a criminal syndicate. This is fairly uncommon, but it has happened in a few places. Usually, the gang is dismissed as riff-raff by other members of the local underworld or otherwise ignored until it becomes too big to readily take down. Its leaders are usually far-seeing, and invest in

operations more sophisticated than street-level crime. A few high-profile robberies or a particularly profitable drug sale can net the capital to launch a more permanent endeavor: an underground gambling club, for example, or a piece of the local union rackets. Initially, they may need to pay for the privilege — protection kicked upstairs to a larger mob — but eventually, they grow big enough to strike out on their own.

Sometimes, that means biting the hand that feeds them or seizing territory from a more established crew, but that was surprisingly easy to do in the early years after the war. The syndicates simply never considered them a threat, ignoring their increased physical skills and assuming that none of them had the brains to make a move. They found out the hard way that not every gaunt was a mindless thug... and that supposedly small-time street gangs could be remarkably adept at killing those who stood in their way. These types of crews tend to be almost entirely composed of gaunts. Normals, when they appear at all, are usually lower-echelon foot soldiers or Johnny-come-latelies who arrive only when the leadership is already solidified. They are usually based around a slum or gaunt district, and are characterized by aggressive tactics reminiscent of an old-fashioned street brawl.

The second set of circumstances that creates a gaunt-controlled mob entails the internal subversion of a previously-established syndicate. Forward-thinking organizations quickly realized the potential for gaunts as leg-breakers and shock troops. They recruited them out of hospital wards and the growing leatherback slums, offering a purpose and a way out of stifling poverty. In some cases, such groups remain just as they were, with normals in control and gaunts contentedly serving in secondary positions. In other cases, however, the gaunts within the gang soon formed a clique unto themselves, following the lead of one of their own while carefully assuaging the suspicions of their normal superiors. They became ambitious, and when the time was right, orchestrated a *coup d'état* that killed or displaced their would-be superiors.

Such incidents cemented the leatherbacks' reputation for betrayal and brutality, but also brought them a level of power which they have could not have gained so quickly on their own. They inherited an existing apparatus, and had cash flow from numerous illicit sources. They simply replaced the normals in charge with gaunts and kept rolling. Most were able to maintain the safety and security of their predecessors (though the reduction in size meant surrendering some operations to other gangs), and could establish new political ties to counter those which they lost through prejudice. It was an instant recipe for success.

The question of how normal mobsters respond to taking orders from gaunts becomes pivotal to any leatherback-controlled syndicate. Sometimes, the new gaunt bosses had the backing of other normals within the gang, who feared or respected the gaunt leadership more than their own bosses. In other cases (especially those with a large number of gaunts), the coup entailed a purge of every normal in the gang, who were quickly replaced by gaunts. Most of the time, however, new normals eventually arrived to fill in the blanks. Simply





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

put, the leatherbacks still constituted enough of a minority that they could not perform every job in a given organization. Normal criminals were impressed by the gaunts' audacity and attracted to the money which could be made — a factor which can overcome any amount of prejudice.

Similar patterns emerged in the cases of gaunt street gangs who outgrew their bottom-rung roots. Though their membership began as leatherbacks only, they invariably added more normals into the mix as their operations grew and they required outside assistance. Bigots were quickly disposed of, and criminal outsiders in search of new opportunities could find easy work doing the leatherbacks' bidding. The gaunts themselves reveled in such developments. They had begun their lives as the pettiest of petty scum, and now had normals at their beck and call: proof positive (from their perspective at least) that crime pays.

## Modus Operandi for Gaunt Mobs

Criminal syndicates run by or dominated by gaunts generally follow the same behaviors evinced by any other criminal organization. Details can be found in Chapter Three. There are, however, a few key differences, which sharp criminologists can use to differentiate a gaunt-run organization from one led by normals.

In the first place, gaunt-run mobs are usually much more fluid than the normal syndicates. Their structure has been less codified and thus there is less compulsion to adhere to it. Things are quicker, more fluid, and as a consequence, more volatile. Leaders hold onto power through cunning and force of personality. They hold it because their underlings *think* they hold it; if that ever changes, then so too does the leatherback at the head of the table. Internal strife is much more noticeable within a gaunt gang. Members jockey for position with much more ferocity, and conflicts are far more lethal than they are in normal syndicates. A gaunt crime lord who can go one year without an assassination attempt from within his ranks is a powerful leader indeed.

The upside is that this makes gaunt syndicates very vibrant and energetic. They act rapidly, taking what they want with no hesitation. This allows them to react quickly to unforeseen circumstances; there's no consulting the Don, no conferences or meetings on the best way to proceed. They simply do what they need to do, and pick up the pieces once the dust has settled.

On the other hand, this leaves most gaunt syndicates extremely unstable, led more by mutual consent than any kind of solid structure. They tend to collapse and reform with surprising speed, and the high amount of turnover within their leadership makes it easier for outside rivals to do them in. For all their recent dominance, many normal-run syndicates believe they are a temporary phenomenon, and that their own volatility will help hasten their demise.

To counteract that, the more forward-thinking gaunt syndicates have begun emulating the tactics of their betters. They establish a structure similar to those of normal mobs, in some cases kept intact from former leaders whom the gaunts have usurped. To this, they add their own unique innovations — the quick decision making, the aggressive crime spree,

the almost willful application of violence and threats — while still maintaining the chain of command and respect for higher-ups. The combination is lethal, mixing the terror techniques of street-level gaunt gangs with the flexibility and long-range thinking of established criminal organizations. The codes of *omertà* are quite important to these young turks, but rather than adhere to strictures laid down by the normal gangs, many of them have established their own, rewriting them to match their "modern" sense of honor. Gaunts who pledge such codes take them as seriously as normals do. It helps cement their sense of self, which is never entirely stable following the trauma of the change.

Similarly, the romanticized image of the gaunt mobster in newspapers and radio has led many of them to adopt it as their own identity. They begin aping the fashions of established gangsters, adhering to traditions to which they never belonged but which they now seem destined to control. Many of them simply emulate what they hear on the radio, affecting the accents of fictitious characters like Pigeon Hole Franklin on the *Spectre* radio show. Others follow the social example set by normal gangsters around them. It likely helps minimize the differences between gaunt mobsters and normals, allowing them to interact more readily. And certainly, it provides the gaunts with a self of self to cling to, their newfound identity fed by the icons and expectations provided by their new lifestyle.

Gaunt-run mobs participate in all the same activities which normal mobs do (and which are covered in depth in Chapter Three). The biggest difference comes in how they handle racketeering and political influence. Unions initially proved resistant to infiltration from gaunt mobs; their anti-leatherback prejudices extends to doing business with the underworld, and they often refuse to cooperate with gaunt-instigated schemes. The gaunts responded by working through human proxies, plying the wheels with bribes and trying to remain as much in the background as possible. Patience eventually paid off; though they must now filter their involvement through several layers of normal accomplices, gaunt mobs wield as much control over the unions as their normal counterparts. That being said, only the largest and most successful gaunt organizations involve themselves in the unions. The rest concentrate on less subtle forms of crime, and leave racketeering to the big boys.

Politics is equally difficult to navigate, but just as important. Political power is one of the few ways to gain lasting respect, and leatherback mobsters who can't exert influence in city hall soon find themselves squeezed out by their rivals. Normal-controlled syndicates can simply use their puppets to launch a "crackdown" on crime, which of course focuses entirely on gaunt operations. The "gaunt rights" issue is not always popular among many voters, and any politician seen associating with a gaunt is often suspected of gangland ties. To make their presence felt, the gaunts must act with supreme delicacy.

Like unions, they usually move through proxies, meeting with the officials themselves only in smoky rooms far from the public eye. They must often eschew a pro-gaunt agenda, at least early on; to do so courts a backlash and can remove

## CHAPTER SIX: GAUNT CRIMINALS

their man from office almost before he enters it. Anonymous campaign donations and the blackmail of opposition candidates is their bread and butter. Both are silent, effective, and relatively invisible. Ballot stuffing can be effective too, though obviously gaunts have little impact on normal-based voting blocs (leatherback thugs who show up at the polls are suspicious in the extreme, and gaunt mobsters can't really use them until they are deeply entrenched within the civic structure).

Other gaunts, however, are a gold mine for illegal voting. Officials have difficulty telling leatherbacks apart, allowing them to vote multiple times with no suspicion being raised. All it takes is enough pull within the gaunt community itself, either through intimidation or more positive means of persuasion. Many gaunts are more than happy to help throw a monkey-wrench into the process which routinely ignores them, and agree to vote as often as the local leatherback boss requires.

Beyond that, more direct forms of criminal enterprise come extremely easily. Prejudice works in their favor during robberies or truck hijackings, as the victims happily hand over the goods rather than risk bodily harm from the "monsters." Extortion operations work much the same way, while gambling and prostitution businesses become trouble-free when the customers know an angry gaunt may show up if they misbehave. The biggest challenge during such operations is preventing victims from becoming *too* scared — blind panic may cause them to do something foolish, or complicate what should be a very simple transfer. Accordingly, some gaunt mobsters adopt very calm and reasonable facades when conducting their business; it helps keep others in hand, and rarely diminishes from their natural sense of menace.

### Gaunts in Normal Mobs

Leatherback mobsters aren't limited to syndicates run by one of their own, of course. From the earliest days of gauntism, criminals sought them out for work as enforcers and leg-breakers. The first gaunt mobsters were low-level muscle men, used to commit various acts of violence and not much more. They became a perverse sort of fad: any syndicate which wanted to be intimidating needed a few gaunts on the payroll. But rarely did leatherbacks hold any positions of importance; simply put, no one ever took them that seriously.

That changed quickly enough, of course. With more and more gaunts appearing in the ranks of organized crime, they began jockeying for more power and control. Eventually, they seized control of the gangs to which they belonged, or else set up syndicates of their own.



Those gaunts which remained in predominantly normal organizations were generally competent yet unambitious. They did what was asked of them and never looked for additional opportunity. Many of them were content to serve as foot soldiers, coasting on their physical skills and following orders without question. Some of them rose through the ranks as attrition and underworld politics claimed their higher-ups, but they rarely advanced in large numbers. Their bosses were simply too worried about a gaunt-led coup to put their leatherbacks in too many responsible positions.

Today, leatherbacks are a common staple in most normal-led syndicates, though they rarely appear in large numbers. Most of them serve as capos or foot soldiers, though a smattering of higher-ups can still be found. Many of them act as specialists — assassins or bodyguards assigned to one particular member (usually a made man). Though not powerful, gaunts in normal-led mobs are often very prominent, appearing with their Don or capo during public meetings and the like. Their loyalty is strong, though not as strong as it might be in a gaunt-run crew. Though they tell themselves they fit in, part of them understands that they will always be outsiders. Still, their lot is often better than it would be anywhere else, and leatherbacks who have fostered enmity with the local gaunt mobs can usually find a good position among their normal rivals.

The only normal gangs who refuse to use gaunts at all are those with active prejudices (such as the Scarelli mob in Central City) or those run or dominated by warlocks. These syndicates quickly draw the ire of gaunt criminals in their area, and war constantly with the leatherbacks over territory, political connections, and the thousand tiny details which define one's standing in the underworld. Even they must acknowledge gaunts as a reality, however; for better or for worse, the leatherbacks have found a niche in organized crime, and though many consider their prominence just a phase, the gaunts themselves believe that they're here to stay.

### GAUNT THIEVES AND ROBBERS

Gaunts actually make good second-story men, though their reputation doesn't always suggest that. Those blessed with the right abilities (such as night vision or sinewy joints) can get in and out of places with exceptional stealth. Their features are automatically hard to identify, making for natural disguises, and the fear and antipathy they generate in normals can prove immensely helpful during any unexpected confrontations. While the public fixates on images of gaunt armed robbers, shooting up banks and bellowing demands at the top of their lungs, the ranks of quieter gaunt thieves are quietly prospering.

Most gaunt thieves prefer to work alone; though they may have accomplices who help them in the planning stages, when the time comes to take the goods, they don't want anyone else in the way. The friction gaunts tend to create with prejudicial normals (coupled with an overall lack of trust of the outside world) may have something to do with this. Teams of gaunt thieves are not unheard of, but there are still too few in the profession to band together the way they have in other fields. Smart normals sometimes work with gaunt thieves as well,

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

but the trust required to maintain such teams is simply too hard to come by. In the vast majority of cases, the gaunt thief is a lone wolf.

This has the advantage of allowing the thief to keep the profits of his endeavors (less the pay-offs to informants and assistants, which are often little more than operating expenses). But it also means shouldering more of the risk, and ensuring that the task can be carried out by one man alone. Gaunt thieves tend to plan meticulously — even more than most professionals — to keep potential trouble to a minimum. They're also more willing to cut their losses and flee if difficulties arise; though burglars are not inherently violent people, police are apt to shoot first if they spot a gaunt on the premises.

Gaunt armed robbers, of course, are an entirely different story. The usual cocktail of intimidation and implied violence serves them exceptionally well, and few gaunts who pursue a criminal life aren't tempted to commit some flashy armed robbery at some point or another. Those with hair-trigger tempers seek robberies as a means of venting their aggression; they rarely last long, though their careers are often quite spectacular. Those with cooler heads act with far more planning and foresight... though they too adopt an aggressive façade during the robbery itself.

Indeed, in the heat of the moment becomes hard to differentiate between a thrill-kill hold-up artist with one foot in his grave, and the more meticulous armed robber who plans his scores very carefully. The difference is that the professional directs his rage for maximum effectiveness, shocking his victims into doing exactly what he tells them to. The hot-heads are much less directed in their anger, attacking people for no reason or inciting blind hysteria instead of blind obedience. Law enforcement often has a difficult time picking out one from the other; only the size of the scores serves as a reliable marker, though the cops are slowly catching on to the subtle nuances between amateurs and pros. Regardless of their approach, however, all gaunt robbers know that the police would rather shoot them than arrest them. Stand-offs and confrontations with gaunt armed robbers rarely end well.

Gaunt thieves tend to seek out high yield scores which can be moved very easily. Cash, jewelry, and the like are much preferred, leaving more difficult items like art or heavy metals to other thieves. Similarly, while hijackings are a staple of gaunt criminals, they often have a buyer set up ahead of time, or else they'll sell their wares quickly within the local gaunt district. Scores are planned with a fast turnaround in mind, and anything which needs to be kept on ice is generally disdained. Stolen art and similar objects may be affected by the gaunts' corroding aura, which causes extensive damage to such materials. More than a few gaunts have filched paintings, sculptures, and the like, only to have them disintegrate before their eyes when they tried to store them in a gaunt district. A successful leatherback art thief will either have a seller waiting extremely quickly (hard to do when the police are fresh on the trail) or else store it somewhere far away from the thief and his fellow gaunts (which usually requires a normal proxy).

More information on thieves and armed robbers can be found in Chapter Two.

## GAUNT CON ARTISTS

The art of the con can be difficult for gaunts, since so many people distrust them at first sight. The seduction required to work a first-rate grift is often impossible to come by, leaving the number of gaunts in the confidence game small in the extreme. Nevertheless, a few still flourish there, and if placed in the right role, they can bring immeasurable benefits to a well-conceived swindle.

Short cons are not overly difficult for gaunts, as long as they play into the mark's haste and confusion. A store owner, for example, will likely want to get the leatherback out of his establishment as quickly as possible, and thus overlook the fact that the gaunt has switched his twenty for a ten. Or a bigot targeted with the wipe (see page 16) will be all too eager to help "bilk" the gaunt of his money. Leatherbacks who practice the short con quickly learn which swindles work for them, and how to play other people's prejudices to the best possible advantage.

With the big con, a gaunt's role must be chosen very carefully. Gaunts tend to make very poor ropers, since their looks and poor reputation make it very difficult to gain the confidence of the mark. On the other hand, they can be very effective inside men, especially if the con involves convincing the mark to do something illegal. Gaunts bring a sense of danger and mystery to the proceedings; if presented as a shifty sort from the get-go, it can help sell the con, as well as further evoking the mark's greed (if a gaunt's involved, it must be illegal... and therefore profitable). More entrenched gaunt criminals — mobsters or those associated with a syndicate — can serve as fixers if need be. Many gaunt con men work semi-permanently as managers, running a big store and coordinating with multiple groups of ropers and inside men.

But the place where gaunts truly excel is in the delivery of a brush-off. Few marks have the stomach to endure a leatherback with his wind up, especially following a long and nerve-racking con. Once again, the gaunt's natural ability to shock and frighten becomes a tangible asset, as he bellows angrily, barks orders, or even picks the mark up and shakes him like a rag doll. While the threat of embarrassment or possible jail time is an equally effective inducer, the right performance from a gaunt con man leaves an impression that the mark will never forget.

Needless to say, teams composed solely of gaunt con men are nearly nonexistent; at some point, they need the assistance of normals in order to properly fleece the mark. When they join a group of con artists, their inherent sense of loyalty connects them very closely to their teammates. They will endure all manner of discomforts and impositions for the sake of the con. If the police become involved, they will keep quiet, even doing prison time rather than turn over their colleagues. In some cases, this loyalty is admirably reciprocated, but other con artists may be tempted to exploit it to their own ends. Such betrayals often provoke profound anger in the gaunt, who will stop at nothing to hunt his backstabbing comrades down.

More information on cons and con artists can be found in Chapter One.

## CHAPTER SIX: GAUNT CRIMINALS

### GAUNT CRIMINAL NPCs

#### SAUL MIKELSON, GAUNT EXPLOSIVES EXPERT

All gaunts destroy things, corroding them through the aura which is as much a part of their identity as their skin or vital organs. Saul Mikelson likes to think that he's just speeding up the process. He's always been adept at timers and wiring, and he knows how to enter places without being detected. He has memories of the time before his change, when he served as an army saboteur in the war against the Order of Nu. Now that he's a gaunt, he's parlayed that knack into a thriving criminal career. Bank robberies, insurance fraud, even assassinations ... as long as it involves explosives, he's willing and eager to lend his expertise.

He goes about his job with a nihilistic cheerfulness that sets even other crooks on edge. In his way of thinking, everyone and everything is destined for destruction. What difference does a few days (or years) make? The darkness in the world has a way of seeping in regardless of how much you do. Why not embrace that inescapable truth and celebrate it with a few loud bangs? Of course, the money's nice too, especially when he thinks about the dumps most gaunts have to live in. He likes being able to afford proper plumbing, and the view of the sea from his Paradiso bungalow isn't bad either. None of that would be possible if he weren't willing to light the odd fuse or two.

He works through a middle-man located in Terminus, collecting offers from crews all over the country. Three or four of them serve as the foundation of his business (most notably the Baron's Men in Terminus), but if the fee is right, he'll work for just about anyone. He maintains caches of equipment in every city, allowing him to collect what he needs without risk-

ing arrest on a plane or train. The less he knows about the job, the more nervous he feels, so he always demands as much information as possible. If necessary, he even employs a pair of snoops — normals who don't draw attention to themselves — to case a joint and deliver the technical details which his criminal partners wouldn't think to look for.

As a result, his jobs always go off without a hitch. He uses cunning timers in all his work — modified clocks so accurate they can note down to the second when the blast will go off. They make tunneling a breeze and can knock even the stoutest vault door off its hinges in no time. His arson fires start cleanly and lack any incriminating evidence; investigators fault electrical shorts, embers from a fireplace... anything but deliberate arson. He prefers to remain off-site when his creations go off, but that's rarely possible; nothing can ruin a beautiful bomb like allowing an incompetent nitwit to activate it. He's very stealthy and moves as quietly as a cat, which gives him a considerable advantage during those times when he must oversee his work personally.

Mikelson accepts contract hits as well, serving as an assassin-for-hire to an assortment of criminal interests. His preferred method is the car bomb: unvarying but brutally effective. Unlike robberies or arson jobs, he insists on working alone during contract hits, setting the explosives himself and choosing the precise moment to activate it. Human life is too precious to be taken away by amateurs; Mikelson understands the enormity of killing another human being, and wouldn't dare foist that





## GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

responsibility onto anyone else. Though he has no qualms about who he accepts as a target, his contracts must specify who is to be killed exactly. Additional casualties are an affront to his professionalism. The vast majority of his hits have been against gangland figures, with a few corrupt politicians thrown in for good measure.

He maintains a workshop in the basement of his home, where he experiments on the devices which form his criminal calling. He has a contractor's license, which allows him to purchase dynamite and other explosives, and he also maintains several black market contacts who can provide him with military-quality explosives. He never keeps such material in his home, however; once he knows how to build the device he needs, he goes to one of his caches to actually assemble it — and he never does so until the job itself is imminent. His neighbors believe he's an ordinary gaunt who got lucky with some construction contracts; though extremely wealthy, he never spends enough to draw suspicion to him.

Mikelson is a smallish gaunt with flattened ears and a strangely go-lucky air. He dresses in casual clothes with the sleeves perennially rolled up, and has an appetite for candy bars that approaches the gluttonous. He always keeps two or three on hand should he suddenly feel a craving, and his basement workshop is festooned with crumpled wrappers from a dozen brands. He takes long walks along the Paradiso beach when he isn't working; the surf and the fresh air do wonders for his outlook. And he rarely associates with other gaunts — or indeed anyone beside professional associates and those who contract his services. To Mikelson, his work is everything... and everything, sooner or later, comes back to work.

### Saul Mikelson

**Attributes:** Brains 5, Brawn 6, Build 7, Gut 5, Moxie 5, Smoothness 8.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 35.

**Skills:** Athletics 4, Brawl 3, Contortions 5, Demolitions 10, Drive (Car, Truck) 4, Engineering 5, Evasion 6, Firearms 3, Perception 7, Pick Lock 6, Stealth 7, Streetwise 5.

**Backgrounds:** Gaunt, Sinewy Joints, Small.

**Profession:** Gangster 1, Wealthy 1.

## JEB MYER, GAUNT SERIAL KILLER

Jeb Myer is best known as the gaunt with the gin-house: friendly and open to all comers in the Buckner housing area of Terminus (see *The Naked City*, page 131). His bar — a crude affair, even by gaunt standards — offers cheap rotgut at bottom-barrel prices, and rakes in money by the fistful. He's one of the few people who seems happier as a gaunt, laughing behind the stretched mask of his rough features and grayed skin. And he has a right to be happy: becoming a gaunt saved him from a death sentence.

Myer — once known as Bascon du Chambois — has murdered eight children and hurt several others. He's a serial killer, a fiend, and now as a gaunt, he's been given a new lease on

life. They almost had him before the transformation, but lost him and could no longer recognize him once the change came. He escaped the hangman's noose then — washing his hands clean of the blood that covered them — and slipped back into society under an assumed name and background. He's evaded his pursuers almost completely — shedding his past like a snake's skin — but the dark longings he feels stayed with him through the change, and now compel him to continue his unspeakable work.

In keeping with his new persona, Jeb maintains an overly friendly demeanor. He makes friends with his neighbors and ensures that no one suspects what goes on in the storm cellar he's dug beneath his pinewood company house at the end of a Buckner row. With his tremendous strength and terrifying presence, he lures or forces his prey here within any number of hidden means. Since his transformation, he's only killed two, but he knows that more will come. He's careful not to choose children who would be missed. One was an orphan in the city, and the other's family assumed that he just ran away. No one asked questions, no one came looking, and Jeb managed to keep everything quiet enough to make it all invisible.

He still holds their skulls in his hands in the hours before dawn, remembering fondly how they begged him to die.

The sound of partying upstairs, and the coming and going of people to his gin joint at all hours covers any sound the children might make. If anyone catches him, they'll kill him for certain and Jeb knows it. As a gaunt, he won't survive long enough to reach trial; even the police will just shoot him in the head and leave him for the gators. But he can't stop the monster that lurks in his heart, the evil creature that tempts him in the middle of the night. And now another boy has caught his eye — one whose wide brown eyes haunt his dreams and make his greasy palms sweat blood. The child is Anson Buckner, son of one of the wealthiest men in Terminus and Jeb's boss. He saw the boy with his father, surveying a building project in the warehouse district, and hasn't been able to get him out of his mind ever since.

As soon as he can find a way to make young Anson disappear, Jeb knows he won't be able to resist. It will be another sweet little skull lined up in his basement, tied with ribbons and bows and boiled clean long after the screaming stops. He'll keep the people dancing and singing in his bar upstairs while he dreams his terrible thoughts and plans for the future... a future he knows will end at the hands of a baying mob.

### Jeb Myer

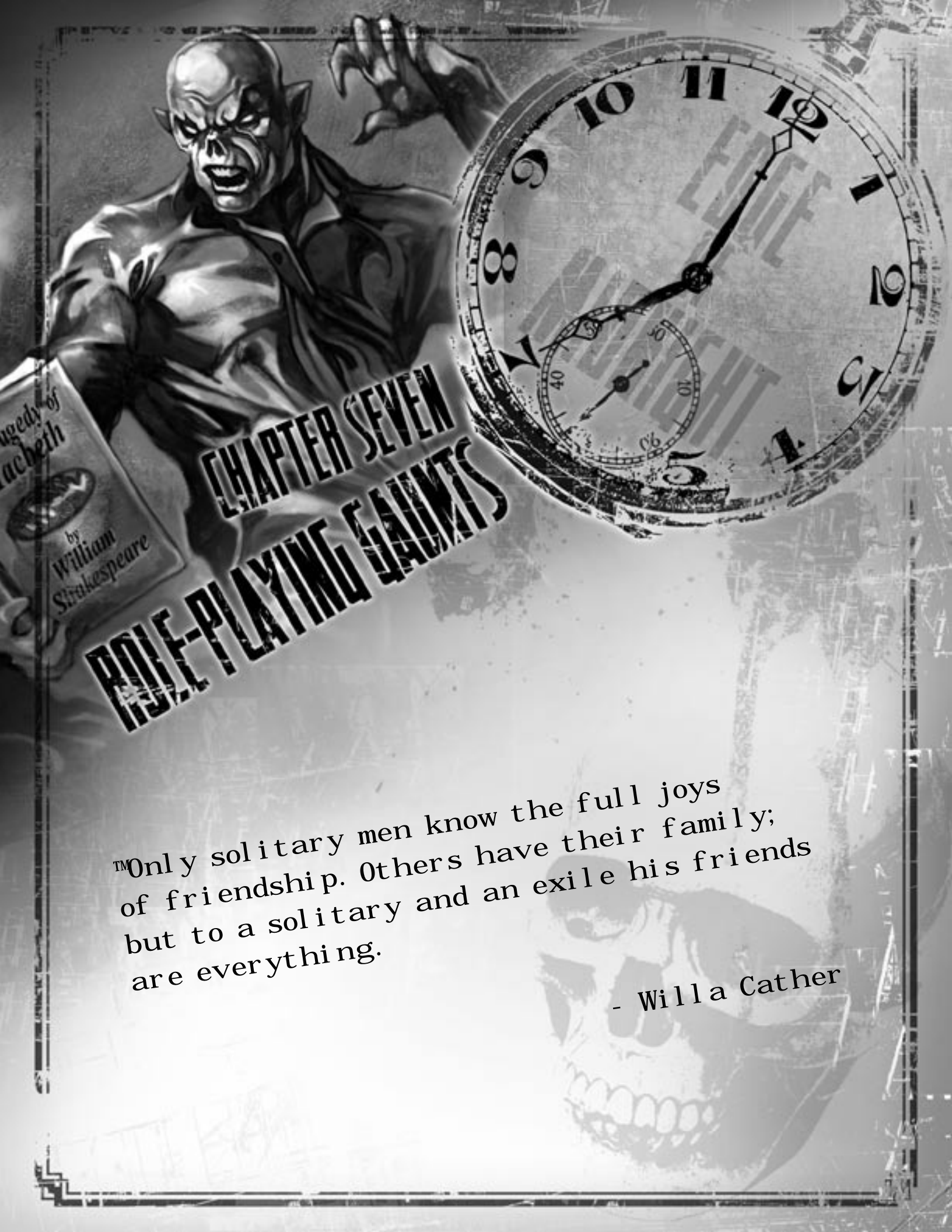
**Attributes:** Brains 7, Brawn 6, Build 6, Gut 4, Moxie 4, Smoothness 5.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 30.

**Skills:** Athletics 5, Brawl 7, Evasion 4, Firearms 4, Intimidation 6, Lore (Taxidermy) 5, Melee 6, Perception 7, Pick Lock 4, Stealth 7, Streetwise 2.

**Backgrounds:** Accelerated Immune System, Gaunt, Reduced Light Vision.

**Profession:** Blue Collar Worker 3.



agedy of  
acheth  
by  
William  
Shakespeare

# CHAPTER SEVEN ROLE-PLAYING GHOSTS

TM Only solitary men know the full joys  
of friendship. Others have their family;  
but to a solitary and an exile his friends  
are everything.

- Willa Cather

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## ROLE-PLAYING GAUNTS

*Jacob slumped down over the bottle, having drained the better half of it within the past ten minutes. He had officially entered the raging stage of drunkenness — the one where lucidity battled tooth and claw with delusional incoherence. The gaunt polishing glasses on the other side of the bar gazed tolerantly at him. Jacob was the last customer of the night, and he looked like he still had a ways to go yet.*

*“...sho I go back tadda farm,” he slurred at the leatherback, “where my granny brought me up da besht she knew how. And do you know wad I found?”*

*“I can’t imagine,” the gaunt replied conversationally.*

*“Nuthin’. An’ I don’t mean some empty houshe or developersh’ bulldosher... I mean NUTHIN’ wash there! No houshe, no shtables, not even the grave where gramma wuzh buried...”*

*“Could be you just went to the wrong place.”*

*Jacob’s head shot up, his bloodshot eyes suddenly focusing. “No. It washn’t that. I should know where that plashe wuzh. I should KNOW. But I din’. And that started me thinkin’.*

*“You ever notishe how nobody talksh about when they were kidzh? They don’t have pictursh or nuthin’ from way back then... No old toyzh, no drawingsh, no report cardzh or baseball mitz or nuthin’. Maybe just one or two thingsh from mommy and daddy. Even then, they can’t remember how or when they got it — nuthin’ shpecifick anywayzh.*

*“Sho I was thinkin’ about that, an’ about my grammazh’s grave that wuzhn’t there an I said to myself, ‘It’s like nobody ever really HAD their childhood.’ An’ then it hit me: what if we DIDN’T? What if we don’t remember what happened before because there WUZ no before? What if we all jush popped to life one day — like they turned on a shwitch and shuddenly there we all wuzh... You ever felt that way, buddy?”*

*The gaunt smiled — a strangely warm and sympathetic smile — and poured Jacob another drink.*

*“As matter of fact,” his voice was calm and reasoned, “I have...”*

This chapter covers gaunts as members of the Few, and tips for players who wish to run gaunts as characters within a given campaign.

## ROLE-PLAYING THE CHANGE

Few things are more traumatic in *The Edge of Midnight* universe as being afflicted with gauntism. In the course of a few short days, you become a living monster, your identity stripped away from you and replaced by that of a fanged horror. Your facial features are lost beneath a leathery gray mask, your memories and emotions ravaged beyond recovery. When you emerge, everything you may once have been is lost. Your friends and family shun you, your job vanishes, even your

house and furniture slowly fall into decay as a result of your new condition. It drives some mad; others it transforms into bitter monsters, unable to cope with the hand fate has dealt them. Even the most well-adjusted gaunt isn’t immune to the trauma it causes, and most regard the change as one of the most psychologically harmful incidents in their lives.

In *The Edge of Midnight*, most gaunt player characters are assumed to be that way from the beginning of the campaign. They have already undergone the change and accepted their new identity; their personality has had time to make the adjustment from normal to gaunt, with any attendant differences which that entails (see page 121 of the *Edge of Midnight* core rulebook for more information). But some players might relish the challenge of experiencing the change mid-campaign — of having their normal character suddenly struck by the dreaded disease of gauntism.

In mechanics terms, this is very easy to accomplish. The player must first gain the permission of the GM, who is the ultimate arbiter of such developments. Assuming the GM approves, the player then need only purchase the Gaunt background when he has accumulated enough experience. In order to preserve the sense of suddenness with which the disease comes across, however, we recommend that the character not gain the benefits of that background right away. Instead, it should be gained at a point selected by the GM, appropriate to the campaign and no more than three game sessions after it is purchased. This allows the GM to place the character’s affliction more effectively within the context of the story, and give the player a better sense of what it means to be suddenly afflicted with gauntism.

Most gaunts retain the skills they earned as normals, though they may not remember how or when those skills were acquired. Accordingly, a new gaunt character shouldn’t lose any of his or her abilities (save those which are specified in the Gaunt background description on page 26 of the *Edge of Midnight* core rulebook) or be otherwise penalized, at least in mechanical terms.

In role-playing terms, however, the circumstances are much more complicated. The change is a profound event in the character’s life, and should be played out to maximum efficiency. General details on the transformation can be found on page 121 of the *Edge of Midnight* core rulebook; the specifics are up to the GM, but should take up a considerable portion of a given gaming session. The change often takes weeks and settles upon the character very gradually. Growing headaches or nosebleeds, for example, often crop up at inopportune moments, and could signal the start of the change a session or two before it actually manifests.

As the condition progresses, blackouts become common and the headaches grow to ferocious intensity. The character may need to report to the hospital; each city has a few that deal with gaunts, and every doctor worth his salt has learned how to identify the symptoms. Most hospitals will help with the transition and provide a stable environment for the new gaunt to accept his condition. If that isn’t an option, however, things may become more serious. The protean gaunt will likely hole himself up, away from human contact and out of the public eye

## CHAPTER SEVEN: ROLE-PLAYING GAUNTS

while his body goes through the changes. This could prompt a search from the other characters, who may have no idea why their friend has disappeared, or from less benevolent figures who could do considerable damage if they ever found him...

Once the change is complete, a whole new series of challenges awaits the character. He may have lost considerable parts of his memory and his personality will likely exhibit new traits as well. Assuming he can find his way back to his old life (perhaps with the help of the other PCs), he may find his

previous habits and occupation closed to him. His employers may fire him, old friends will refuse to speak to him, and the remaining PCs will have to come to grips with his new state, perhaps creating tensions within the party that didn't exist before. There may be new temptations as well: the local criminal element may try to recruit him if he has skills they need. More law-abiding gaunts may need him as well: to help protect them, to work in the district in some capacity, or just to reassure them that they aren't alone in the world.





# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

With such tumultuous upheaval comes a new sense of self — a way of looking at the world profoundly different from the way one did as a normal. Eventually, the character will find his place in the universe — a place different and likely much harsher than before. Whatever the circumstances, they should not be squandered in the role-playing arena. Adjustment can sometimes take years of game time, and though most gaunts come to accept their new condition, few of them ever fully get over the trauma of transformation. The process of adjustment should be paramount in the player's mind; let him use the time as an opportunity to explore new aspects of his character, rather than simply a chance to play with new gaunt abilities. If played right, it can make a fine dramatic chapter in the character's overall story arc, or perhaps even give new life to a character who might otherwise be running out of interesting things to do.

## GAUNTS AS MEMBERS OF THE FEW

The ranks of the Few contain a surprising number of gaunts, far more than their percentage in the general population would indicate. The process they go through is very conducive to the sort of existential questioning which leads one to join the ranks of the Few. A leatherback asking how he had come to be this way or what the causes of his condition are is apt to be led down the same path that all members of the Few follow. After all, who knows better than a gaunt that something is wrong with the world, and who would be more motivated to seek out the cause of such misalignment?

However, belonging to the Few has its own kind of psychological peril for gaunts. For one thing, it cuts them off from their own community: one of the few places where they might find a modicum of understanding. Despite their numbers among the Few, most gaunts are as oblivious and unquestioning as the rest of the world, and those who espouse such skepticism are as likely to be ostracized as normals. For another thing, the sense that the world is off-kilter can lead one to believe that gaunts as a whole are off-kilter as well and that their presence — indeed their very existence — is anathema to the universe. The random acts of altruism which the Few engage in are rarely appreciated when the altruist is a gray-skinned monster, and the sense that nothing they do makes any difference can lead to intense, sometimes suicidal despair.

But despite that, gaunt members of the Few are a remarkably resilient bunch, well-equipped to handle the stress and rigor their questioning causes. Many of them are Protest Atheists, and may view their activities as an expression of this new modern faith. Others see the Few as a chance to atone for their sins (real or imagined), or to offset the excesses of an otherwise criminal existence. And the shared skepticism which marks all members of the Few may help eliminate some of the prejudice they endure... at least as far as their fellow questioners go. There's nothing like a common cause — a cause which many would consider insane — to smooth over differences between gaunts and normals.

## GAUNTS IN MIXED GROUPS

There are usually few problems bringing gaunts into mixed groups. Though prejudice may cause some friction between leatherback PCs and their normal counterparts, such friction remains well within the context of ordinary party relations. The primary difficulty with using gaunts comes when one of the normals in the party is a warlock. Sorcery use is extremely painful to leatherbacks, and magic created by a PC is apt to cause unforeseen damage to his gaunt colleagues — usually at a key moment in the scenario. Furthermore, the natural antipathy felt by both sides makes functioning together without fighting extremely difficult, and can lead to a lot of unnecessary conflict.

Beyond the obvious remedies of keeping such differences toned down (PCs, no matter what their stripe, should find ways to work together), there are several steps which the GM can take. The first is to accentuate both sides' status as outcasts. Gaunts are often harassed by the police, even if they're law-abiding, while warlocks risk arrest simply by being who they are. Two otherwise polar opposites could find themselves working together as a matter of survival, especially if they have enemies or rivals in common. Mutual threats have a way of smoothing over any quibbling differences, especially on the hard streets of *The Edge of Midnight*.

A warlock can also become more acceptable to a gaunt if he recognizes his addiction and works to keep it under wraps. The less he practices his magic, the less danger he is to a leatherback, and the more the two characters' common traits will come to the forefront. The struggle to maintain oneself in the face of an incurable compulsion makes a potent *noir* story tool, should the warlock's player be so inclined. (It also increases the effect — both literally and dramatically — on those occasions when the warlock does cut loose with his magic. Not only is it all the more impressive for being seldom used, but the effects it has on an allied gaunt could cause considerable dramatic complications.)

In addition, a previous loyalty or friendship might forge bonds that no antipathy can undo, no matter how painful it may be for either side. Perhaps the gaunt knew the warlock before his transformation and retains some residual camaraderie. Or the warlock has established a friendship with the gaunt and keeps his magic use to a minimum because of that. Stranger pairings have occurred, especially in a world as full of moral grays as *The Edge of Midnight*. Though they are apt to raise some eyebrows, gaunt-warlock partnerships aren't entirely outside the realm of possibility.

Perhaps the most important factor in facilitating gaunt-warlock party members is the fact that warlocks have no intrinsic reason to dislike gaunts. Leatherbacks hate sorcerers simply because their powers cause gaunts intense pain. Sorcerers react to gaunt hostility in kind, but otherwise have no reasons beyond typical prejudice to dislike gaunts. A warlock player could parlay that into a softened motivation for his character, allowing him to "play nice" with gaunts in his party. A gaunt who becomes aware of such compassion might be inclined to return the favor — or at least be civil enough to allow them to work together.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: ROLE-PLAYING GAUNTS

### ALL-GAUNT CAMPAIGNS

Though somewhat unusual, a party consisting entirely of gaunts is certainly a possibility in *The Edge of Midnight*. Leatherbacks tend to congregate together, and their mutual condition forges bonds that can become akin to family. Below are a few ideas for running an all-gaunt party in your campaign.

#### BLOCKMATES

Gaunt extended families make the perfect fit for a party of player characters. Though coming from disparate backgrounds and lacking any initial connections, they find themselves sharing quarters in some dilapidated district, and forced to band together to survive (see page 125 of this manual and page 129 of the *Edge of Midnight* core rulebook for more information.). The bonds they form are very similar to those of a typical role-playing party: a surrogate family trusting only each other and unifying in the face of an uncaring world. Not only does such an arrangement give the characters a natural reason to stick together, but it also provides a base of operations (the building they occupy), a set of rivals/enemies (groups from nearby blocks, the normal majority), and a goal to strive for (bettering their lives).

Gaunt surrogate families are usually based around a senior member and several “apprentices”: those who became gaunts more recently and who received help and guidance from the leader during their first few painful months. Such a figure can make a good GM surrogate — an older, wiser NPC who provides guidance (and scenario impetus) for the player characters. Losing such a figure can make a good motivational tool, egging the PCs to seek revenge, or perhaps just live life as their mentor wished them to. The common link helps connect them in ways that go beyond their living space, ensuring that the party always has a reason to remain together.

Blockmates can also be easily inserted into scenarios focused around an individual PC, since their adopted loyalty makes them willing to help in any situation. For example, say one of the characters is a gaunt policeman in the middle of a big case. The department won’t give him the resources he needs, of course, so he turns to his blockmates to help him with the investigation. Similarly, a gaunt private eye could use his blockmates in the same way, or even just as extra muscle in case things get too dangerous. Gaunt mobsters can use their old comrades to help dispose of evidence, or to confide important information to them just before a stint in prison.

Other scenario ideas can spin out from this foundation quite easily. Battles with other districts or rival gangs are a common occurrence, and Machiavellian scheming from a rival gaunt community can land the PCs in hot water with the local police. Underworld figures could attempt to move in on the party’s hard-won territory, or coerce the PCs into joining them. An unforeseen injury could send the party out in search of medicine, while the constant breakdowns caused by their mutual aura will lead to an endless search for replacement parts. The

need for a bottle of antibiotics or an expensive transmitter for their home could lead them into all sorts of trouble. And of course, the rundown streets of the gaunt districts hide all manner of secrets: missing persons transformed into gaunts, formerly prime real estate concealing long-forgotten valuables in its now-crumbling infrastructure, and the like. It’s no small leap to assume that the party could stumble across one, thus inviting all manner of trouble to their front door.

Finally, the interconnectedness of blockmates makes for a very logical foundation of their status as members of the Few. If one of them finds some odd trinket that doesn’t feel right, or notices a war statue with no dates on it, he’s apt to share what he finds with his fellows... who might be more likely to buy into his questioning based on their affiliation with him. Like any other collection of the Few, they take comfort in the fact that they’re not alone in their belief. The fact that they act as an extended family would enhance that sense of belonging considerably, as well as highlighting their little cabal’s stance against a forbidding and unwelcome world.

#### VIGILANTES

Gaunt blockmates join together for mutual protection. But as outlined in Chapter Five, they might join together for other reasons as well — most notably to serve as a self-appointed police force. Gaunt vigilante groups might come from disparate backgrounds and occupy different sections of a given district. But they all believe in protecting their area from danger, and have banded together to provide safety where the official police will not.

Gaunt vigilante groups fit in quite closely with traditional notions of a role-playing party. They are independent, answering to no authority save their own instincts. They act in concert, relying on themselves before consulting any outsiders. And they are always ready for trouble, whether it be a local criminal gang or obstructionist politicians from City Hall. Some of them hold outside jobs, using their skills to draw traditional paychecks and serving as vigilantes only in their off-hours. Others devote themselves full-time to it, trusting on others in the community to provide for their needs. But all of them pool their resources together to bring to the gaunt districts what they could not otherwise hope for: a sense of justice for the wronged and persecuted.

Vigilantes have no official mandate. Thus they do not have the power to conduct official investigations or to make official arrests. They receive no special favors for their efforts, save in the most extraordinary circumstances. The successful ones learn to operate within legal vagaries. For example they can carry weapons (possession of firearms is guaranteed under the U.C.’s founding charter), but they can only use them to defend themselves. So they learn to couch any conflicts in terms of “defending themselves.” Similarly, they may not make official arrests, though citizens’ arrests are permitted provided they immediately turn the suspect over to the police. The police will also accept any evidence the group can provide, though they will thoroughly examine it to determine its authenticity.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

Vigilantes don't need warrants to enter a home or business, but they risk arrest for unlawful entry if they do. And in some cases (where they feel the suspect doesn't deserve the formality of a trial), they can kill him; so long as they hide the evidence, they need never worry about an "official inquiry" the way police can.

A group of vigilante PCs must learn how to operate within this gray zone, taking it upon themselves to determine where the lines are, and whether or not to cross them. Some of them adopt very strict codes, which they demand that all members adhere to; in this instance, they may appear similar to criminal syndicates who also make use of a code of honor. Less formally, they will need to determine what kind of approach they take to the police, how they respond to crimes or calls for help, and what steps they are comfortable taking in enforcing the safety of their community.

Few police departments like dealing with vigilante groups; they further muddy the already-clouded distinctions between criminal and law-abider, which makes the "real cops" job much harder. Some vigilantes seek to smooth out those differences, cooperating with the police as much as they can. Others scorn official law enforcement, viewing them as tools of an oppressive government, or perhaps just thugs with a badge. Luckily, the police rarely enter gaunt districts, which gives the vigilantes plenty of leeway to act as they please. How they choose to exercise that freedom — and how much they decide they need the police — will go a long way toward determining how they approach their duties.

Most vigilante groups devote their time to patrolling their local area and keeping an eye on any potential troublemakers. They come prepared for combat, armed with whatever weapons they can afford and ready to use them if things get ugly. They watch for suspicious behavior, looking more for recurring trouble spots than any specific crime or criminal. The aim is usually to prevent the crime before it starts, using their presence as a deterrent to crooks who might think the gaunt district easy pickings. Their staunchest opponents are other gaunts: local gangs or members of better-organized syndicates who use the districts as their personal playground. The more presence a vigilante group can exude, the less likely it is that criminal elements can establish a foothold. And if regular patrols don't do the trick, then a few savage beatings might convince the reprobates to find easier hunting grounds...

Sometimes, however, brute tactics aren't enough. Sometimes a crime requires a more thorough investigation: a challenge which most vigilante groups must face at some point or another. With the official police unwilling to commit the resources to crimes affecting gaunts, it falls to those within the leatherback community itself to track down the suspect. Such cases require investigative work beyond merely patrolling the streets and thumping a few skulls: deductive reasoning, leaps in logic, the persistence to track down existing clues, and the determination to bring in the criminal no matter what the cost. Thefts are rare among residents of gaunt districts, simply because there's very little to steal. Murder and more heinous crimes, however, are quite common and sometimes require

lengthy investigations to catch a culprit. And those who set themselves up as the district's protectors are the first people the victims (or their survivors, if necessary) will turn to.

Scenarios based around such investigations posit the vigilante PCs as avenging angels, performing the work which traditional law enforcement can't. In many ways, they will need to adopt standard police methodology: examining the crime scene for clues, interviewing the victims and any witnesses or suspects on hand, and developing leads to follow until they uncover the perpetrator. In the gaunt districts, this can be difficult work. Evidence dissolves quickly under the constant effects of gaunt auras, and concrete suspects are difficult to pin down without more formal training.

In some cases, a proper investigation will require help from outsiders — forensic reports, details on the condition of the body, and the like. Though normals are loathe to help gaunts out in such a fashion (especially gaunt vigilantes, often viewed as little more than criminals themselves), they can still be persuaded to lend a hand. Of course, they will almost certainly ask for favors in return, leading the vigilantes into scenarios which they may not have anticipated. It's never fun to help a coroner out by fencing goods taken from the dead, or paying off a cop by keeping tabs on a suspect hiding in the district. It can, however, make fine role-playing.

## CRIME LORDS

The establishing of a criminal syndicate is perhaps the most natural route for an all-gaunt party to go. As the rising young turks of the criminal underworld, gaunts can achieve a great deal in a short amount of time. Nothing pays like crime to a leatherback, and respect earned from the barrel of a gun is still respect — something gaunts rarely receive in any form. A group of PC toughs who work their way up from the gaunt districts to rule the underworld makes the fine basis for an extended campaign, and can be set up with just a few additional considerations.

Gaunt mobsters operate much the way normal gangsters do; details on such a campaign can be found on page 88, while details on gaunt mobsters can be found on page 151. Beyond that, however, there are few unique elements for a party of all-gaunt mobsters to consider. Like any criminal characters, they should determine how they came into their current profession — do they have a natural inclination to crime, or did they turn to it out of desperation? — and how they all came to be working together. This can easily connect with the "Blockmates" concept covered on page 161, with the characters first coming together as new gaunts, and then mutually deciding to turn to crime to survive. Or they can act as members of a previously established gang, who know each other from that association. This can be particularly potent to an all-gaunt group operating in an organization of normals: the slights and insults from their fellows can serve as a natural unifier, enticing them to work together and even take over the gang from within.

Once the players have established an appropriate background, the GM should work out what kind of obstacles and opportunities will exist for a gang consisting solely of gaunts. They will largely be unable to work with warlocks, who have

## CHAPTER SEVEN: ROLE-PLAYING GAUNTS

the capacity to cause them great harm. Their operations will usually be based in the gaunt district, at least initially; that means they'll have to worry about their fellow gaunts stealing their hard-earned swag from beneath them, and fend off attacks from any rival gangs or vigilante groups which target them. Their political influence will have to stay below the radar, lest the public take notice of the leatherbacks gathering around their chosen candidate; the PCs will have to figure out how to influence legitimate politics without taking a direct hand.



Finally, the players should give some consideration as to how they will live once their success starts to grow. Will they remain in the gaunt districts, keeping their spending down to avoid drawing attention to themselves? Or will they move into the normal community and better living accommodations? If they do, how will their normal neighbors react? Will their higher profile mean more attacks from rivals and increased attention from the police? Or will it grant them greater security, allowing them to aim their sights ever higher? Questions like these are more difficult to answer for gaunt criminals than normals, who can blend into normal society more easily. Grappling with them can easily become one of the most rewarding aspects of a gaunt criminal campaign.

### USING GAUNT NPCs IN YOUR CAMPAIGN

Gaunts as a whole are no different from any other group of NPCs. They all have individual motives, and what one does will often differ wildly from what any of his fellows would do. Despite their fierce individuality, however, their use as NPCs still falls into a series of broad categories, from which their basic motives and attitudes descend. Below is a series of brief outlines detailing different types of gaunt NPCs, and ways to present them in your campaign. It is by no means an exhaustive list; it merely touches on some of the more common tropes one is apt to find in *The Edge of Midnight*.

#### VILLAINS

The bigotry heaped upon gaunts has a profound effect on their psyche, which sometimes leads them to embody the very prejudices which cut so deeply. Some gaunts believe they should be monsters on the inside as well as the outside, while others use monstrous means to attain what they could never earn by playing fair. Villainous gaunts can be truly terrifying, using their looks to intimidate those around him while exploiting their remarkable abilities to cause all manner of grief. In short, they make first-rate adversaries and can be excellent foils for your PCs.

At the very least, leatherback villains should have their physical appearance played up whenever possible. The black eyes, the skeletal noses, the mouth full of razor sharp teeth... the more frightening they seem to the players, the more of an impression they'll make as villains. Gauntism can also add a touch of the tragic to their personae; a leatherback gangster who chose this life as the only way of survival and bitterly regrets the awful things he's had to do has more depth and personality than one who does it just because he's bad. On the other end of the spectrum, leatherback villains can represent the ultimate Other: creatures which are utterly unlike human beings and which represent all that is skewed and wrong about *The*



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

*Edge of Midnight* universe. A gaunt villain with a vast reach and limitless resources (Jack Drago, for example) can bring a perfect sense of existential dread to the campaign. He puts a face on the impersonal forces that toy with the characters, personifying their alienation from the rest of the world. Making such a figure truly monstrous — with a face to match his soul — can enhance the menace he represents and turn him into a truly memorable antagonist.

Conversely, the gaunt antagonist could appear as an unlikely source of justice. The head of a vigilante squad, for example, or a dogged gaunt policeman could present themselves as obstacles at every turn. Like their criminal counterparts, they don't scare easily, and while getting rid of them won't cause much stir in the normal world, it could produce a nasty backlash from the gaunt community. Antagonists in this vein will use that status to their advantage, turning other gaunts against the characters through means both direct and cunning. Such NPCs are used to being dismissed and ignored, and can quickly teach a cocky party that it is most unwise to underestimate them.

## FLUNKIES

Similarly, the increased strength and stamina of most gaunts make them ideal minions for a wealthy villain. They provide a good sense of short-hand menace — big, ugly, and mean with a quick capacity for violence and a penchant for causing may-

hem. Though it's severely limiting to view gaunts in this way, it also makes it easy for GMs to give their foot soldiers a little spice. Gaunt flunkies tend to be very straightforward and do as they're told.

In these cases, adding just a little motive can help develop them into interesting characters without detracting from their basically disposable roles as cannon fodder. As an obvious example, perhaps the flunkie is well-paid and gets a chance to live on his employer's fine estate rather than down in the gaunt district; for that, he's more than happy to break a few legs. Or maybe his employer once protected him from an anti-gaunt mob, and he now feels obliged to repay the debt by serving as a protector or manservant. Their fearsome visages provide the menace they need; the motivation adds color to it, bringing the semblance of real character to an otherwise standard supporting figure.

## FRIENDS/ALLIES

Gaunts are so used to being treated poorly that when someone gives them a fair shake, they respond exceptionally well. Player characters in need of help are apt to find staunch allies in the leatherbacks if they play their cards right. The normal community tends to discount the thoughts and opinions of gaunts, regardless of how important they are; characters who can cultivate one as a resource would have an edge that others might not even consider. And of course, it's nice to have a big leatherback in your corner when the bullets start flying.



## CHAPTER SEVEN: ROLE-PLAYING GAUNTS

Gaunt allies serve as the counterbalance to villains and antagonists: the positive face to the disease. It gives characters a chance to interact with them as friends — or at least valued associates — and to overcome the fears and prejudices which mar so much of their world. A gaunt ally can also play off of existing negative stereotypes, developing the NPC into a more detailed personality. An infamous gangster, for example, might aid them in an act of altruism, or a faceless factory worker might help them identify an important clue based on some long-forgotten memory from before his change. The hulking brute might have a heart as soft as cotton, leading him to protect the PC's child at all cost. Or the dirt-poor slum dweller might be hoarding a small fortune under his floorboards, which he provides the PCs at a pivotal moment. Such acts of altruism — if justified, of course — can indebted the PCs to their gaunt friend as much as he may be indebted to them. And of course, nothing's free in *The Edge of Midnight* universe; that close ally may himself run across a problem someday that requires the party's help to solve...

### OBSERVERS

Observers, witnesses, snitches, informers... gaunts can occupy all of these positions and more. Their status as a perennial underclass means that they are routinely ignored (when they aren't being treated with fear and revulsion that is). Many of them hold menial jobs — janitors, cleaning women, assembly-line workers — which render them invisible in the background. Once people get past their appearance, they tend to ignore them, which allows them to watch and remember anything that goes on. Police rarely think to question gaunt witnesses following a crime (they're considered unreliable), while criminals might consider them non-factors when conducting their foul deeds. All of which makes them excellent yet untapped sources of information which the PCs can make use of if they so choose.

While gaunt villains and henchman flaunt their monstrosity, gaunt observers require the exact opposite approach: they appear anonymous and unseen. This is not as much of a leap as it may first appear. The changes wrought by gauntism remove their normal features, effectively erasing their identity. They become empty ciphers, their gray heads difficult to distinguish between one gaunt and the next. Without more to anchor them in place, they recede into the shadows: doing their jobs quietly and without fuss. From there, they can witness any number of things undetected, from a politician planning blackmail to a murder in the bitter watches of the night.

The trick is first finding such a witness and then getting him to disclose what he has seen. Gaunts are less willing than most to stick their necks out unnecessarily, and some may view the quick disclosure of such information as another form of exploitation. Why should they help the PCs? What will they gain in exchange? Obviously, gaunt party members can convince them more easily, but getting them out of their shell is still a task. And that assumes the PCs can even find them. Leatherbacks who hide in the background can be notoriously difficult to track down, and if they feel that they're in danger, they can simply vanish into the slums. It's easy to mistake

one gaunt for another, which could lead the PCs to hunt down the wrong witness. And even if they follow him deep into the gaunt district, their very presence there could create untold problems. Leatherback observers can be valuable resources, but their invisibility can be as much an advantage to them as a handicap, and they won't hesitate to use it if they are reluctant to reveal what they know.

### VICTIMS

Few gaunts like to think of themselves as victims, but the fact remains that many of them are victimized by virtue of their very existence. They are denied basic rights and human dignity. They are ignored or treated with outright fear. And when one of them has a problem, the powers that be don't lift so much as a finger to help them. Many of them believe that the world will never give them an even break; every day, in a thousand ways, that belief is proven true.

Gaunt victims can serve as a potent illustration of the existential cruelty of the *Edge of Midnight* universe: the fact that even those who have lost everything can still be made to suffer. It could also rouse the PCs' wrath, providing them with a sense of injustice to direct against the evils which caused it. For a gaunt murder victim, the PCs may hold the only possibility of finding the killer — the cops sure won't do it. For a leatherback squeezed by the mob, the PCs could help him get back on his feet, or stick it to the criminal syndicate in retribution.

In addition to serving as an easy motivator, gaunt victims also serve as a way for the party to confront their own prejudices, and perhaps look at the leatherbacks as something other than gangsters and thugs. In addition, a gaunt victim whom the PCs aid is more apt to prove an ally in later scenarios, paying off his debt to the party through direct aid. Gaunts remember kindnesses far more readily than normals do, and are more willing to repay that debt should circumstances ever permit it. A seed planted with the simple assistance of a gaunt victim could pay significant dividends just when the PCs are looking for a little help of their own.

## GAUNT ALLY NPC

### "MACHINE" HANK KERRIGAN, GAUNT VIGILANTE

Henry Peter Kerrigan was nobody's idea of a hero. A lifelong alcoholic with big knobby fists and a temper like a slow-burning fuse, he was a walking assault conviction just waiting for the right moment to manifest. He had served some combat duty in the war with respectable results, but he pawned his medals to help pay for his bar tab and couldn't hold a job for longer than six months after the war. When gauntism claimed him one cold and blustery November, most of those who knew him breathed a sigh of relief. He couldn't do much worse as a leatherback, they reasoned, and now that he had vanished into the gaunt district, they wouldn't have to put up with those dark, smoldering eyes threatening to blaze with fury.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

He took up residence in the swampy, grave-choked slums of Terminus, roughnecking for money in the day and drinking himself into a stupor at night. He couldn't remember much of his life before the transformation, but whatever demons his past contained seemed to follow him into his new state. It was only through the grace of God that he stayed out of prison, though his near-homicidal barroom brawls made it a close thing sometimes. He had no purpose and no future; just another aging tough guy with a chip on his shoulder and no one to blame.

Then word came down about a gaunt woman in his neighborhood, who had been beaten to death by a black sheep blue-blood belonging to Terminus's hallowed DuMont family. The young man had killed her, he claimed, because he was tired of seeing her ugly face when she shuffled to work each morning. Thanks to his high-priced lawyers, he was sprung before the judge could say "mistrial," and the entire gaunt community despaired at the horrible miscarriage of justice.

Something about it struck a chord in Machine Hank Kerrigan. He had known the woman vaguely and though she meant very little to him, he knew she had done nothing to merit such an appalling fate. The sight of her smirking killer swaggering down the steps of the courthouse, crowing about how justice had been done, set that slow temper of his burning.

He was meticulous and methodical about taking revenge. He didn't lunge at it the way he would at a foe in a bar, nor did he embrace its near-certain path to the electric chair. He made a list of all the people he would need to take care of — lawyers, bodyguards, useful informants, and *le grande fromage* himself — as well as the best and most effective means of disposing of them. It became his all-consuming passion. He quickly dried out, and the lack of a job no longer concerned him. He *had* a job now, and he damn sure wasn't going to blow it.

The first to go were the bastard's lawyers. They held a late-night meeting in their offices to dissect the fallout of the case (which involved several bribes and the casual blackmail of the judge). He padlocked the doors shut and set the building alight. All three of them were dead before the first engine arrived. Witnesses reported "a tall gaunt" in the vicinity that evening, but no one connected it to him — the description fit half the leatherbacks in Terminus.

The bodyguards were next. A pair of them had been with their master the night he murdered the woman and (it was suspected) held her down while she was slowly pummeled into hamburger. He'd have to go through them to get to the boy anyway, so it was just as well. He filched three sticks of dynamite from a local construction firm, then hot-wired it to their car. He was lucky and they were both inside when it went off, sparing him the need to repeat the process.

Finally, there was the killer himself. By this time, the DuMont boy had grown quite paranoid and refused to leave his lavish estate on the outskirts of Terminus. He had repeatedly requested police protection, but the Terminus PD was far too overworked to provide him with any babysitters. Kerrigan slipped by his hired guards easily; he knew how to be quiet when he needed to be. He took the man's fingers with a pair

of garden shears and then slowly and methodically beat the hapless normal to death. The police found him locked in his private sauna, smears of blood on the walls intermingling with the billowing gusts of steam. And again, no one could identify the killer or speak of anyone other than an anonymous gaunt in the area at the time. He walked away clean after murdering six people — six people who had crossed some unspoken line in his mind and who received what he considered fitting justice for it.

He wasn't alone. Though the police gradually let the case slip — things were bad enough in Terminus — word slowly leaked out about how Wendy Beaumont's sick twist killer met his end and that a gaunt was responsible for the ending. Though no one knew who he was, Kerrigan began something of a cult figure among Terminus's gaunts — a source of quiet word of other gaunts with similar problems: gaunts who have been cheated by the system and watched their oppressors skate away. When he feels it's merited — when the perpetrators cross that invisible line humming in his head — he answers the call, and delivers whatever fitting punishment his anger carves out for him. He does it because it's the only thing on Earth that makes him feel clean.

He's been off the sauce for three years now, and his nightly barroom scuffles have dwindled to the occasional misunderstanding. Sooner or later, he figures the police will finally put it all together and come after him. He doesn't mind. He's at peace with what he's done, and he knows he's given his fellow gaunts a reason to believe in justice again.

Kerrigan stands about six foot two, with a build that's both wide and angular. His hands are a web of scars (he's handled enough broken bottles to fill a football field), while his face is marred only with a gaping nose cavity resulting from a break before his change. He dresses in dingy clothes and hides his face behind a wide-brimmed hat; his voice has an air of menace to it, even when he's calm and collected. He retains a knowledge of firearms from his days as a soldier, and his melee combat skills have been honed by countless outbursts of sporadic violence. He retains his old haunts in the bars of the district where he lives, even though he no longer partakes of their services. When he's not "in his office," he can be found walking the streets, communing with whatever demons he's finally managed to make peace with.

## **Machine Hank Kerrigan**

**Attributes:** Brains 5, Brawn 9, Build 8, Gut 7, Moxie 3, Smoothness 7.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 40.

**Skills:** Athletics 6, Brawl 7, Demolitions 5, Drive (Car, Motorcycle) 4, Engineering 5, Evasion 7, Firearms 6, Intimidation 8, Melee 8, Perception 6, Pick Lock 5, Stealth 7, Streetwise 6, Throwing 7.

**Backgrounds:** Gaunt, Huge, Rugged.

**Profession:** Street Tough 2.

# APPENDICES



Curtis Kendrick

™ Tony, do something terrible.

- Cousin Avi (Dennis Farina),  
Snatch



## CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

The following is a breakdown of major felonious crimes in the Unified Commonwealth, along with a brief definition and the typical sentences for a convicted offence. These definitions have been culled from various legal resources, and are presented in a fictional context. They are not considered binding anywhere outside of the *Edge of Midnight* universe.

### Arson

The willful burning or intention to burn a house, business, public building, or vehicle. Arson has a variety of motives, including insurance fraud, homicide, and simple insanity (pyromaniacs often set fires in order to gain an emotional charge). Sentences can range up to ten years.

### Assault and Battery

*Assault* is defined as attacking or physically threatening another person with the intent to cause harm while *battery* is actually causing that harm. Though legally distinct under the law, the two are virtually synonymous. The crime is further divided between *simple assault* — an assault committed without intent to kill, rape, or rob the victim — and *aggravated assault* — an assault committed with a lethal object and the intent to kill, rape, or rob the victim. Prison sentences range from two to ten years.

### Breaking and Entering

Unlawful entry into a building for the purposes of committing a serious crime. *Burglary* is a form of breaking and entering specifically involving theft. Punishment ranges from six months to two years in prison.

### Extortion

Obtaining money, property, or possessions from another with consent induced by use or threat of physical force to his person, family, or property. Extortion carries harsh penalties with it, including prison sentences of up to eight years. Many cities crack down on it as a way of containing organized crime, whose members use extortion as a means of making money.

### Fraud

An intentional lie or misrepresentation presented to another person for the purposes of gaining money, passing oneself off as an official, or the like. The key factor is that the victim involved suffers damage or injury due to his reliance on said information. Fraud encompasses everything from tax evasion to swindles and confidence games. Prison sentences are usually no more than two or three years.

### Homicide

The killing of another human being. Homicides are broken into three categories. *First degree murder* is killing a person “with malice aforethought,” (i.e., premeditation) or during the commission of a felony. *Second degree murder* is killing another person without premeditation: in the heat of the mo-

ment or as the result of unanticipated provocation. *Involuntary manslaughter* is killing a person without intent to harm, either by commission of a non-felonious crime, or by a lawful act in an unlawful manner likely to cause death (such as reckless driving). Prison sentences range from ten years to life without possibility of parole, and extenuating circumstances may invoke the death penalty.

### Illegal Substances

This offence covers the use and sale of drugs or similar substances;

**Possession:** knowledge of the location of — and control over — an illegal substance, or the intent to exert such control. Multiple persons may be in possession of something if they all know where it is and control or intend to control it. *Possession with intent to distribute* means possession with the intent of transferring the substance to another person (regardless of financial gain). Prison sentences are light, ranging from several weeks to one year.

**Use:** smoking, inhaling, injecting, or otherwise ingesting drugs or similar substances. This definition does not include drugs taken under the supervision of a doctor or similarly licensed professional. Prison sentences are also light, rarely longer than one year.

**Distribution:** To sell, lease, assign, or transfer an illegal substance for the purposes of financial gain. Prison sentences range from one to five years, but with the recent growth in the illegal drug trade in the U.C., those penalties have begun to increase.

### Kidnapping

The abduction of another person with the intent to hold him for ransom, use him as a hostage, aid in the commission of a felony, terrorize or inflict physical injury upon him, or interfere with the performance of the government. It is punishable by up to ten years in prison, and is considered a national crime if it crosses province boundaries.

### Larceny

The unlawful taking of property from another person's possession. Purse-snatching, shoplifting, pick-pocketing and theft from public buildings all constitute larceny. *Petty theft* entails stolen possessions worth \$300 or less (usually a misdemeanor). *Grand theft* entails possessions worth more than \$300 (a felony). Sentences range from six months or less (petty theft) to upwards of five years (grand theft).

### Prostitution

The giving or receiving of the body for hire for the purposes of sexual activity. Prison sentences range from several weeks to one or two years.

### Rape

Obtaining carnal knowledge of a woman against her will. *Sexual assault* is defined as an attack with the clear intent to commit rape, whether or not said rape was actually committed. It is punishable by up to fifteen years in prison. Rape of a male victim falls under the definition of assault.

## APPENDICES

### Robbery

Theft or attempted theft in which the perpetrator takes the property by physical force or intimidation. *Armed robbery* entails the perpetrator using a weapon or the appearance of a weapon in the course of such a theft. Prison sentences run from one to fifteen years.

### Theft

See "Larceny."

## A GLOSSARY OF CRIMINAL TERMS

The following list constitutes a sampling of the terms and slang used by con artists, gangsters, and other members of the criminal underworld.

**Addict (n):** a mark who has been fleeced so well or who is so sure of himself that he falls for the same con multiple times.

**Administration (n):** the ruling elite of an organized crime syndicate, composed of the boss, an underboss or underbosses, and any consiglieres.

**Alphabet (n):** a prison sentence so long that it cannot be characterized by numbers.

**All day (n):** a life sentence in prison.

**Apple (n):** see "Mark."

**Associate (n):** a member of a crime syndicate who works with and for a made man, but who has not yet been made himself.

**Babbo (n):** an idiot, someone of low intelligence.

**Bangtail (n):** a racehorse.

**Bankroll (v):** to put up the expense money for a con.

**Barber (v):** to talk.

**Bean-shooter (n):** a gun.

**Beef (n):** a disagreement or complaint.

(v): to report a confidence man to the police.

**Behind the eight-ball (adj):** cornered or in an unduly tight spot.

**Big con (n):** a large-scale con requiring substantial preparation, resulting in an exponentially larger pay-off.

**Big house (n):** prison.

**Big Sleep, the (n):** euphemism for death.

**Big store (n):** the place where a big con is played out. Big stores are often dressed up to appear as established businesses, such as gambling dens, telegraph offices, and the like. (See page 24 for more.)

**Blanket party (n):** throwing a blanket over a fellow prisoner before attacking him, so he can't identify his foe(s).

**Blind (n):** an area in prison where a prisoner can't be seen by the guards.

**Blow (v):** to leave.

**Blow off (v):** to get rid of a mark after his money has been taken.

**Blues (n):** prisoner's clothes.

**Blute (n):** phony newspaper clippings used to help facilitate a con.

**Boiler (n):** a car or automobile.

**Boodle (n):** a phony bankroll of bills, usually made by sandwiching a stack of small bills between a pair of much larger bills.

**Books, the (n):** a euphemism for membership in an organized crime syndicate. When someone is made, the books are "opened." When no one is being made, the books are "closed."

**Boss (n):** euphemism for a prison guard.

**Box (n):** a safe; a bar.

**Box job (n):** a safecracking.

**Boxman (n):** a criminal specializing in locks and safes.

**Brake fluid (n):** Antidox, the drug used to control magic use. Alternately, any drug used to control or modify someone's behavior.

**Brace (n):** to question someone, usually in a harsh or violent manner.

**Braced game (n):** a crooked gambling game.

**Breeze (n):** to leave, go.

**Broken (v):** to be demoted in rank within an organized crime syndicate.

**Bruno (n):** a tough guy or underworld enforcer.

**Bulge (n):** an edge or advantage.

**Bull (n):** a policeman or prison guard.

**Bullet (n):** a one-year prison sentence.

**Bump off (n):** to murder someone.

**Bump your gums (v):** to talk too much.

**Bum rap (n):** a wrongful conviction.

**Bum's rush (n):** the act of throwing someone out of a bar or other establishment.

**Burn (v):** to murder someone.

**Butter-and-egg man (n):** someone who covers the expenses to stage a theft or other crime; a mark or outsider who spends money freely.

**Button (n):** a made member of an organized crime syndicate. Also, a specific method of blowing off a mark, in which a phony arrest or police raid convinces him to cut his losses and walk away.

**Button man (n):** a professional killer, usually associated with a syndicate.

**C.C. (n):** consecutive prison sentences.

**Caboose (n):** jail.

**Cackle-bladder (n):** a rubber bladder filled with blood, used to fake a shooting or similar violence. It is often used in the course of blowing off a mark.

**Can (n):** jail or prison.

**Can-opener (n):** a safecracker who specializes in opening cheap safes.

**Capo (n):** a ranking member of a syndicate who heads a crew (or group) of foot soldiers; short for *capodecina*.

**Cat nap (n):** an extremely short prison sentence, usually less than one year.

**Century (n):** one hundred dollars.

**Chased (v):** to be barred from associating or doing business with any made members of a given syndicate.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

**Cheese eater (n):** a snitch or informant.  
**Chick (adj):** to be short of money.  
**Chill (v):** to lose interest in the con ("the mark chilled when he saw the cops"). Also, to stack a deck of cards.  
**Chiseler (n):** a swindler or cheater, usually petty or low-class.  
**Chopper squad (n):** a group of men wielding submachine guns.  
**Clam up (v):** to refuse to speak.  
**Clean out (n):** to remove all traces of a con from a big store or similar locale.  
**Clean sneak (n):** an escape with no clues left behind.  
**Clear the book (v):** for the police to pin a number of unsolved crimes (rightly or wrongly) on a single suspect.  
**Clip (v):** to murder someone.  
**Clipped (v):** to be shot, usually in the arm or leg.  
**Clock (v):** to keep track of someone's movements and activities.  
**Clubhouse (n):** a police station.  
**C-note (n):** a one-hundred dollar bill.  
**Come-through (n):** a fleeced mark who refuses to let the con artists go, either pursuing them himself, or setting the police on them.  
**Consigliere (n):** the counselor in a crime syndicate, who advises Dons and handles disputes within the ranks (see page 63 for more information).  
**Contract (n):** a murder assignment, either within a criminal organization or taken out by a freelance hit man.  
**Convincer (n):** money used to entice the mark into the con, especially money which he is allowed to win in a crooked gambling game.  
**Cool out (v):** to calm a mark down after his money has been taken.  
**Cooler (n):** jail.  
**Crew (n):** a gang of criminals; more specifically, a group of foot soldiers within an organized syndicate that takes orders from a capo.  
**Croaker (n):** a doctor or coroner.  
**Crush out (v):** to escape from jail or prison.  
**Curdle (v):** for something to go wrong in the course of the con.  
**Deck (n):** a pack of cigarettes.  
**Derrick (n):** a shoplifter.  
**Deuce (n):** a two-year prison sentence.  
**Dick (n):** a detective (usually qualified with "private" if not a policeman).  
**Dime (n):** a ten-dollar bill. Also, a ten-year prison sentence.  
**Ding wing (n):** a prison ward for the criminally insane.  
**Dip (n):** a pickpocket.  
**Dip the bill (v):** to have a drink.  
**Dirt nap (n):** death.  
**Don (n):** the head of a crime syndicate, who enjoys absolute control and reaps the largest share of the profits from the organization.  
**Drag team (n):** a pair of criminals working in tandem against a single victim.

**Drift (v):** to go, leave.  
**Drill (v):** to shoot.  
**Drop a dime (v):** to inform on someone.  
**Drop-in (n):** a particularly easy or effortless con.  
**Duck (n):** a prison guard who gossips to prisoners about other guards.  
**Dump truck (n):** a lawyer who sells his client out, especially one who plea bargains at his client's expense.  
**Dust out (v):** to leave or depart.  
**Dutch (n):** trouble.  
**Earnar (n):** a member of a criminal syndicate whose expertise is making money.  
**Eight-ball (n):** an eight-year prison sentence.  
**Elevating the mark (v):** building the mark's confidence.  
**End (n):** a portion of the pay-off due to each person who takes part in the con.  
**Enforcer (n):** a person who threatens, harms, or kills someone who doesn't cooperate with a given criminal syndicate.  
**Fade (v):** to vanish or go away.  
**Fall (v):** to be convicted of a crime; also "to take the fall."  
**Faro-bank (v):** to take a mark's money through a lengthy period of crooked gambling. The mark is allowed to win just often enough to stay in the game.  
**Felon fodder (n):** inmates.  
**Fence (n):** someone who buys or sells stolen property.  
**Fence parole (n):** escape from prison.  
**Fin (n):** a five-dollar bill.  
**Finger (v):** to identify, usually in connection with informing to the police.  
**Fish (n):** a new prisoner.  
**Fish line (n):** in prison, a line used to pull items from one cell to another.  
**Fish row (n):** cells where new prisoners are placed.  
**Fitted mitt (n):** a bribed policeman or public official.  
**Fix (n):** the agreement of the police not to interfere with a con ("the fix is in"). Also used to describe referees or prize fighters who collude to throw a particular match.  
**Flat (adj):** broke.  
**Flatfoot (n):** a cop or policeman.  
**Flimflam (n):** a swindle or confidence game.  
**"Floor wet!" (n):** a statement used to warn other prisoners that the guards are coming.  
**Flop (v):** to go to sleep; to return home or settle in a single spot.  
**Flyer (n):** an arrest warrant sent out over an entire city or series of cities.  
**Frame (v):** to set up a big store, making it appear to be whatever business is needed for the con to work.  
**Friend of mine (n):** the introduction of a third person by a syndicate member. This person is not a made member of the syndicate; the introduction indicates that the speaker is vouching for him.  
**Friend of ours (n):** An introduction of one made member of a syndicate to another.  
**Front teeth (n):** the dominant gaunt in a given prison.  
**G-note (n):** a one-thousand dollar bill.  
**Gated out (v):** to be released from prison.

## APPENDICES

- Get a place ready (v):** to find a site to bury a corpse.
- Getting short (adj):** less than one year remaining on a prison sentence.
- Give a pass (v):** to grant a reprieve from an assassination or death sentence.
- Gladiator fight (n):** a fight set up in prison for the enjoyment of others.
- Going south (v):** stealing, exchanging illegal money, or fleeing from legal pursuit.
- Goodfella (n):** a member of an organized crime syndicate.
- Goon (n):** a thug or heavy; a criminal who makes his living by inflicting pain.
- Granny Game (n):** a con which specifically targets the elderly.
- Grapes (n):** gossip.
- Grift (n):** a swindle or confidence game. Alternately, any form of criminal enterprise.
- Gripter (n):** a confidence man.
- Grill (v):** to question or interrogate someone.
- Gun moll (n):** a female criminal, especially a pickpocket.
- Gunsel (n):** a gunman or hit man. Also, a weasel or unscrupulous person.
- Hack (n):** a taxi or a taxi driver. Also, a prison guard.
- Hard time (n):** a long prison sentence, or one which is marked by particularly harsh treatment.
- Hatchetman (n):** a killer or gunman.
- Heat (n):** trouble, particularly trouble coming from law enforcement.
- Heater (n):** a gun.
- Heavy racket (n):** a criminal enterprise that entails violence or the threat of violence.
- Hex (v):** to kill someone with magic.
- Highbinder (n):** a corrupt official or politician.
- Hinky (adj):** odd or suspicious.
- Hock shop (n):** a pawnshop or the headquarters of a fence.
- Hood (n):** a criminal.
- Hop (n):** drugs, usually morphine or derivatives like heroin.
- Hop-head (n):** a drug addict, particularly a heroin addict.
- Hot (adj):** stolen or illegally obtained.
- House dick (n):** a detective in the employ of a specific hotel or similar business.
- Ice (n):** diamonds, especially stolen diamonds.
- (v):** to murder someone.
- In the car (adj):** to be in a tight circle of friends, especially in prison.
- Joint (n):** a prison.
- Jug (n):** a bank.
- Jump, the (n):** a hanging.
- Keister (n):** a safe or strongbox.
- Kip (n):** a hotel room or bed.
- Knock (n):** to convince a mark that he is being conned.
- Knock off (v):** to kill.
- Knockover (n):** a robbery or theft.
- Large (n):** one thousand dollars (thirty large would be thirty thousand dollars).
- Leather shop (n):** a wing in prison reserved for gaunts only.
- Lettuce (n):** money, especially folding money.
- Lifer (n):** a prisoner serving a life sentence.
- Limbo (n):** time spent in jail before a trial.
- Loan shark (n):** someone who lends money at an exorbitant interest rate.
- Lockdown (n):** the policy of confining prisoners to their cells, usually in response to an emergency among the prisoners.
- Lousy with (adj.):** to possess a great abundance of ("he's lousy with cash").
- Lug (v):** to direct a mark into a con scheme.
- Made (v):** to be formally sworn into an organized crime syndicate.
- Made man (n):** a formal member of an organized crime syndicate, usually inducted via a ceremony of some kind.
- Mark (n):** the intended victim of a confidence game.
- Mattresses, hitting the, taking to the (v):** engaging in an extended conflict with a rival syndicate or gang.
- Mickey Finn (n):** a drink spiked with knock-out drugs; someone given such a drink has been "slipped a Mickey Finn."
- Mill's lock (n):** a sure thing.
- Mob (n):** a gang or group of criminals (not necessarily a syndicate).
- Monicker (n):** an underworld nickname.
- Mouthpiece (n):** a lawyer.
- Mule (n):** someone who smuggles contraband across the border. Alternately, someone who smuggles contraband into prison.
- Nick (n):** to steal or pilfer.
- Nickel (n):** a five-dollar bill. Also, a five-year prison sentence.
- Nut (n):** the expenses required to set up a con.
- Off the record (adj):** an action taken without the knowledge or approval of a given criminal syndicate.
- Omertá (n):** "manliness;" the code of silence which keeps organized criminals from speaking about their activities.
- On his leg (adj):** pestering someone for special favors.
- On the nut (adj):** broke or without funds.
- On the record (adj):** an action sanctioned by a given criminal syndicate.
- Onore (n):** "honor," specifically as it applies to a gangster.
- Pack (v):** to carry a weapon.
- Palooka (n):** a dull or dim-witted man.
- Paper (n):** a check or similar document.
- Patsy (n):** someone set up to take the blame for a crime; a fool or chump.
- Pen (n):** a jail or penitentiary.
- Peter (n):** a safe.
- Piece (n):** a gun.
- Pig (n):** a police officer or prison guard.
- Pigeon (n):** a mark.
- Pinch (v):** to arrest or incarcerate someone.
- Player (n):** a fellow criminal or someone involved in the same scheme as the speaker.
- Plug (v):** to shoot someone.
- Poop (v):** to kill someone.
- Pop (v):** to murder someone.
- Problem (n):** a person who has become a liability; someone likely to be murdered.



# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

**Pug (n):** a pugilist or boxer.  
**Push note (n):** a one-dollar bill.  
**Put the bite on (v):** to borrow money from someone.  
**Rabbit (n):** a prisoner who is likely to make an escape attempt.  
**Rap (n):** a criminal charge; information.  
**Rat (n):** an informant or someone who otherwise betrays the gang to which he belongs.  
**(v):** to inform on someone.  
**Rest your neck (v):** to be quiet or sleep.  
**Ride in (v):** to entice a mark into a big store.  
**Ringer (n):** something false or phony.  
**Rip and tear (v):** to engage in a con without thought of consequences; specifically, to carry on a con outside of the protection of a bribed policeman or other official.  
**Rod (n):** a gun.  
**Roll (v):** to rob a drunkard.  
**Rope (v):** to bring a mark into a confidence game.  
**Rube (n):** a bumpkin; someone easily swindled.  
**Rub-out (n):** a killing or murder.  
**Rumpus (n):** news or information.  
**Rustle (n):** a riot or other disturbance in prison.  
**Sawbuck (n):** a ten-dollar bill.  
**Score (n):** the money or valuables gained from a robbery, theft, or con game.  
**Scratch (n):** money.  
**Scratcher (n):** a forger or counterfeiter.  
**Screw (n):** a prison guard.  
**Send over (v):** to send to jail.  
**Shakedown (n):** the extortion of money, particularly by corrupt police officers from criminals.  
**Shamus (n):** a private detective.  
**Shank (n):** a makeshift stabbing weapon.  
**Sharper (n):** a swindler or cunning person.  
**Shiv (n):** a knife or makeshift stabbing weapon.  
**Short con (n):** a confidence game which can be played with little or no preparation, and which usually entails a small but quickly obtained pay-off.  
**Short rider (n):** a mark who lives close to the base of operations for a con man or group of con men. Most cautious con artists try to avoid fleecing short riders.  
**Show money (n):** an amount of money flashed before the mark in order to further entice him into the con.

**Shylock (n):** a loan shark; someone who lends money at an exorbitant interest rate.  
**Shyster (n):** a lawyer.  
**Sing (v):** to reveal information, usually under duress.  
**Sit in (v):** to sound a mark out and determine if he is a candidate for swindling.  
**Sit-down (n):** a meeting with the Don or an underboss designed to settle internal disputes.  
**Skipper (n):** a capo.  
**Slough (v):** to lock.  
**Snatch (v):** to kidnap someone.  
**Snitch (v):** to inform on someone.  
**(n):** an informant.  
**Soak (n):** to pawn or sell.  
**Speak out of turn (v):** to overplay the con or to speak a pre-rehearsed line at the wrong point in the con.



## APPENDICES

**Spill (n):** to inform or reveal information.

**Spun out (adj):** out of control or foolhardy.

**Square (adj):** honest, trustworthy, reliable.  
(n): a mark.

**Squeeze (n):** a mechanical device such as a fixed roulette wheel, used in crooked gambling games.

**Stand-up guy (n):** a criminal who refuses to inform on his comrades or syndicate, no matter what the pressure, offer, or threat.

**Stash (v):** to hide something.

(n): an amount of money or valuables, usually hidden.

**Step off (v):** to be hanged.

**Stiff (n):** a corpse or body.

**Sting (v):** to take a mark's money in a confidence game.

(n): the point in the confidence game when the mark's money is taken.

**Stool-pigeon (n):** an informer; also "stoolie."

**Strap up (v):** to carry a shank in prison.

**Street (v):** to remove a mark from a big store.

**Subway dealer (n):** a card dealer who pulls from the bottom of the deck.

**Swag (n):** stolen goods.

**Switch (n):** a form of sleight of hand, by which one object is substituted for another

**Take a powder (v):** to leave, depart.

**Take a walk (v):** to conduct a sensitive discussion while walking or traveling in a public place (usually to avoid bugs or surveillance devices).

**Take around the horn (v):** a practice of the police, whereby they rapidly move an arrested suspect from one location to another in an effort to prevent him from being released on bail or through a writ of habeas corpus.

**Tear off (v):** to cheat one's partner out of his fair share of the proceeds.

**Tear up (n):** a means of getting rid of a mark, usually by tearing up a fake check or notary which the mark believes is genuine.

**Tell the tale (v):** to regale the mark with the false premise which is the basis of the confidence game.

**Three-card monte (n):** a classic short-con game whereby the mark is induced to bet on what he believes to be a winning card. The card turns out to be a loser, costing the mark his money.

**Throw up a block (v):** to block the view of officers or prison guards in order to hide the actions of others.

**Tie-up (n):** the process whereby at least one con man remains close to the mark to ensure that he is still engaged in the swindle.

**Tin (n):** a badge.

**Torpedo (n):** a gunman, especially one associated with a criminal syndicate.

**Touch (n):** the money taken from a mark in a confidence game.

**Trigger man (n):** a gunman or hit man.

**Turnkey (n):** a jailer or prison guard, typically one with little interest in his job.

**Twist (n):** a woman, especially one involved in criminal activities.

**Vig (n):** the interest payment on a loan from a loan shark (short for "vigorish").

**Wall walker (n):** an imprisoned warlock.

**Whack (v):** to murder someone.

**Wise (adj):** to know or be knowledgeable of a specified piece of information (i.e., "he's wise to that.")

**Wiseguy (n):** a member of an organized crime syndicate.

**World, the (n):** life beyond prison walls.

**Yellow (n):** a fake telegram used in a confidence game.

## NEW RULES

The following pages contain a few new rules pertinent to the other areas of this sourcebook. They mostly entail new backgrounds and professions of the type practiced by criminals.

### NEW BACKGROUNDS

Rules for backgrounds can be found on pages 25–29 of *The Edge of Midnight* core rulebook.

#### Cold Start

You can start a vehicle up from nothing and put the pedal to the floor before anyone realizes you are gone.

- Starting a vehicle is considered an instantaneous action with you; it takes no time, and you may take both a simple action and an attack action on the same round if you so choose.

#### The Drop

You have a way of sneaking up on people quietly and finishing them off quickly.

- You inflict an additional 2d10 damage to any successful attacks made when you have surprised an opponent (see page 40 of *The Edge of Midnight* core rulebook for more).

#### Ex-Con

You've done time in prison and have the scars to show for it.

- +1 Build.
- You gain 2 additional points in the Streetwise skill.

#### Jinx

Bad luck always seems to strike your enemies at the worst possible time.

- Once per session, you may target a failed roll made by an NPC within your line of sight. The roll is considered a critical failure.

# GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD

## PROFESSIONS (ADVANCED)

Advanced professions work exactly like basic professions as outlined in pages 29–34 of *The Edge of Midnight* core rulebook. The only difference is that they require a basic profession as a prerequisite before they can be taken. They represent more developed forms of such professions, allowing characters to focus their abilities into a specific field or similar endeavor.

Note that one need not belong to a certain advanced profession in order to practice it. Like regular professions, they represent the way your character does things, rather than the specific occupation he or she holds.

### Boxman

Boxmen are expert safe-crackers. They can get past any kind of lock imaginable, and they know how to do it quietly. Any serious robbery usually entails a Boxman's services sooner or later.

**Prerequisite:** Thief profession.

- Once per session per level, a Boxman may treat a failed or partially successful Pick Lock roll as a total success.

### Carny

Carnies have experience in traveling carnivals and circuses, learning the time-honored ways of separating rubes from their money.

**Prerequisite:** Con Artist profession.

- Once per session per level, a Carny may treat a failed or partially successful Sleight of Hand roll as a full success.

### Consigliere

Consiglieres are the trusted advisors of mob Dons. They rarely do anything illegal themselves, but they play a pivotal role in guiding and controlling the criminal empires of their masters. Many of them are lawyers and even those who aren't understand the nuances of the law — the better to escape any inconvenient prison terms.

**Prerequisite:** Gangster profession.

- Once per session per level, a Consigliere can treat a failed or partially successful attempt to bribe someone (Moxie + Fast Talk) as a full success.
- Once per session per level, a Consigliere can arrange to have an arrested individual released from jail. This doesn't mean the charges against the individual are dropped, and they will still have to face trial when the time comes. But for now, they are free with no questions asked.



### Don

Dons are the capo di capo — the leaders of entire criminal syndicates. Their word is law and their actions control the fate of an entire city's underworld. The position also makes them prime targets, however — from the police, from rival gangs, and even from within their own organization.

**Prerequisite:** Gangster profession or Wealthy profession.

- Dons immediately receive the Loyal Retainer background for free. If they already possess the Loyal Retainer background, then they receive a second retainer, with the same conditions and abilities as the first.
- Once per session per level, a Don may choose to make either his attribute die or his skill die a success (regardless of the TN) when making an Intimidation roll.

### Fence

A fence is skilled at purchasing stolen goods and finding buyers for hot items. Few thefts would be profitable if it weren't for a Fence to whom one could unload the goods.

**Prerequisite:** Thief profession.

- Once per session per level, a Fence may treat a failed or partially successful Appraise roll as a full success.

### Getaway Driver

Getaway Drivers are skilled at evading pursuit, transporting criminals far away from the scene of the crime quickly and with minimal fuss. They know how to operate their vehicles, and have learned countless tricks for evading pursuit.

**Prerequisite:** Thief profession.

- Once per session per level, a Getaway Driver piloting a moving vehicle may shift the results of a successful attack against him. The attack strikes the body of his vehicle instead, causing no damage to the Getaway Driver. He may also apply this ability to attacks which strike any fellow passengers. The vehicle must be moving for this ability to take effect.

### Inside Man

The Inside Man reels in a mark once he's hooked, retaining the man's confidence and convincing him to hand over the money.

**Prerequisite:** Con Artist profession.

- Once per session per level, an Inside Man can imitate the use of a skill or background that he or she doesn't actually possess. It appears for all the world as if you have the ability in question: onlookers will suspect nothing and you can successfully convince them that you accomplished the task in question. The only proof comes upon closer examination, or when the "handiwork" is put to the test. Note that the Inside Man does not actually make any skill rolls with this ability; he only appears to do so for the purposes of fooling onlookers.

# APPENDICES

## Manager

The Manager is skilled at acquiring items to be used in a con, as well as setting up “stores” where a con can take place.

**Prerequisite:** Con Artist profession.

- Once per session per level, a Manager may acquire a common item such as a car, a legal document, a piece of evidence, or \$80. He may also arrange for the use of an unusual area — a police station, for example, or a fake gambling joint — for one hour per level. The GM has the final say on what can be reasonably acquired, and the player should come up with a suitable plan of action to gain what he wishes.

## Roper

Ropers are the traditional “outside men” of con artistry, charged with finding marks and gaining their confidence in preparation for a big swindle.

**Prerequisite:** Con Artist profession.

- Once per session per level, a Roper may learn one useful piece of information about a potential mark which he is casing. He may learn, for example, that the man cheats at cards or that he visits a particular prostitute every Friday night. The GM determines the exact nature of the information.

## Under boss

This profession also includes capos and the like — any member of a criminal syndicate ranked higher than a rank-and-file thug, but who must still answer to his Don. Underbosses are usually charged with a specific territory or criminal operation, and are expected to bring in regular profits on behalf of their syndicate.

**Prerequisite:** Gangster profession.

- Once per session per level, an Underboss may summon and receive aid from 1-6 gangland thugs. Their presence cannot last longer than a single sequence or location, and they must act in what they feel are the best interests of the syndicate which they serve.

## PRISON WEAPONS

NAME	BASE RANGE	DAMAGE
Pipe gun (“zip gun”)	15 feet	3d10 (1 shot)
Brass knuckles*	0	As Brawling + 3
Baseball bat/club	0	2d10 + Brawn
Knife**	10 feet	1d10 + Brawn

\* Many improvisational weapons also fall into this category. For example, pistol-whipping someone or hitting them with a roll of nickels in your fist would produce effects similar to using brass knuckles.

\*\* Shivs, broken bottles, and other improvisational cutting and impaling weapons inflict damage like a knife, but the TN to use them is +1.

## SKILL ROLLS INVOLVING THEFT

The following skill rolls are commonly used when breaking into a building or conducting a theft. They originally appear in Chapter Two, but are presented here for your convenience.

### Scaling a Brick Wall

**Free climb:** Brawn + Athletics, TN 10.

**With a rope:** Brawn + Athletics, TN 5.

**With a ladder:** automatic.

### Scaling a Chain-Link Fence

**Normal:** Brawn + Athletics, TN 5

**Fence is topped with barbed wire:** Smoothness + Athletics, TN 13. A critical failure means that the character is snagged in the barbed wire and suffers 1-2 points of vigor damage. Freeing someone caught in barbed wire: Smoothness + Athletics, TN 5... or a caught character can simply yank himself free by suffering an additional 3-7 points of vigor damage (1d10/2 rounded up + 2).

**Cutting through chain link:** Smoothness + Athletics, TN 3.

**Cutting through barbed wire from the top of a fence:** Smoothness + Athletics, TN 8.

**Detecting a cut fence:** Gut + Perception, TN 7.

### Setting Up or Disabling an Alarm

Brains + Engineering, TN 8, and about one hour’s worth of time. For each additional two hours (and whatever funds the alarm company chooses to charge) spent installing an alarm, the TN to circumvent it increases by +1 (up to a maximum of +4 for private residences, +7 for banks and other institutions). The Brains + Engineering roll to set up an elaborate system is always TN 10, regardless of how much more difficult it is to get around. (This process is not considered a contested roll, because alarm systems are usually set up in a standard way, which the installer’s finesse can’t normally improve upon; the thief therefore bases his roll against the standard, not the installer. The GM can alter that in the cases of special installations if he wishes.)

## GUARD DOGS

Stats for animals in the *Edge of Midnight* universe are available free for download at the game’s official website, [www.edgeofmidnight.com](http://www.edgeofmidnight.com). Stats for an average guard dog are presented below for your convenience.

**Attributes:** Brains -, Brawn 5, Build 5, Gut 7, Moxie -, Smoothness 5.

**Wounds:** 5, **Vigor:** 25.

**Skills:** Athletics 6, Brawl 4, Evasion 5, Perception 8, Stealth 4.

**Backgrounds:** Alert, Huge, Reduced Light Vision.

**Profession:** Thief 3.



## GAUNTS AND THE UNDERWORLD



™We made the big time, malicious and mad  
We're the very best at bein' bad...