

The Rifts® RPG – Celebrating 25 Years of New Dimensions in Role-Playing

Palladium Books® Presents:

THE

RIFTS®

Your Guide to the Megaverse®



*Inside this 224 page,
Double-Sized Issue*

Improvisation G.M. Tips

Rifts® – Town of Semjaw™

Rifts® – Reaper Cell™ Story

Ninjas & Superspies™ – Adventure

Splicers® – Adventure & Source Material

Dead Reign® – Adventure Setting & Ideas

Megaversal Characters & Adventure G.M. Tips

Beyond the Supernatural™ – Monsters of Japan

Coming attractions, news, & more.

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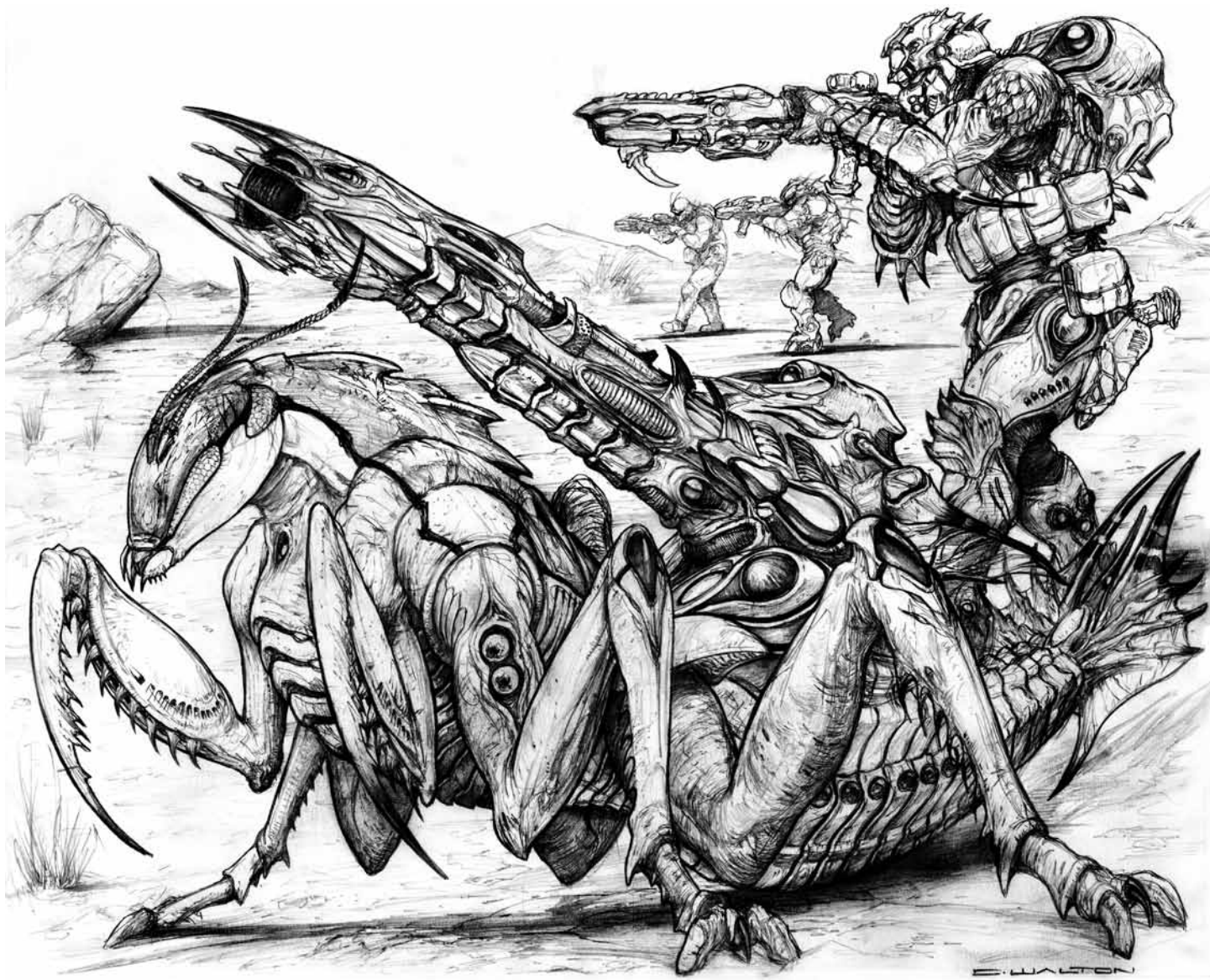
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The Rifter® Number 71 & 72 Double Issue
Your Guide to the Palladium Megaverse®!

PDF Edition – April 2017

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Palladium Books® Presents:

THE RIFTER®

**#71
&
#72**

BRANDT - 97

Sourcebook and Guide to the Palladium Megaverse®

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Special Thanks to all our contributors, writers and artists this issue, especially new contributors. Our apologies to anybody who may have gotten accidentally left out or their name misspelled.

– *Kevin Siembieda, 2015*

Contents – The Rifter® #71 & #72 – Autumn, 2015

Page 6 – Chaos Earth® Scrap Zombie

This issue's *Page Six Art* is a mechanized Scrap Zombie from **Chaos Earth® Resurrection** – zombies weaponized, armored and turned into M.D.C. terrors. And they can be dropped into **Rifts®**, **Heroes Unlimited™**, **Palladium Fantasy®**, or just about any setting.

Artwork by *Charles Walton II*.

Page 7 – From the Desk of Kevin Siembieda

Publisher Kevin Siembieda talks a bit about this issue, being thankful and the approaching holidays. *Merry Christmas* from all of us to you and Happy New Year.

Page 8 – Palladium News

This issue's news section starts off reminding you that it is *Palladium Christmas Surprise Package* season! Our annual thank you to our fans in which you can order a pile of product and get autographs on the cheap. And there is still time for you to get one! Kevin also talks about what has been going on, plans for **Rifts®** and **Robotech® RPG Tactics™**, and other good stuff.

Page 9 – Coming Attractions

See what's out and learn what new books are coming your way, like **Chaos Earth® Resurrection**, **Rifts® The Disavowed**, **CS Heroes of Humanity**, **Island at the Edge of the World** (back in print) and more. Palladium products are available in stores everywhere right now.

Page 17 – Christmas Surprise Package™ – 'Tis the season to game, game, game

It is the deal of the holidays. And because this issue is coming out so late, you are the first to know that we'll be extending the availability of the 2015 Christmas Surprise Package till January 15, 2016. Order now and after the holidays. The Christmas Surprise Package with autographs and plenty of good cheer is our way of saying, "Thank you, we appreciate you," to our loyal fans. Happy Holidays.

Page 21 – Infinite Possibilities – Gaming Across the Palladium Megaverse®

Author and game designer, *Kevin Siembieda*, talks about why he created a game system that can accommodate every genre and simple ways to convert them. It is fun to bring villains and elements from different game settings into one another. Even diverse levels of technology and magic can find a place together and add spice to your games. Bring your **Rifts®** or **Heroes Unlimited™** character to **Palladium Fantasy**. Use any Palladium game setting and its source material as inspiration for adventures, villains and places in any of the other adventure settings. Dare to be a genre buster.

Page 24 – Thoughts on Megaversal Adventures – If you can conceive of it, you can put it together – Official Game Master Tips

Julius Rosenstein writes about his experiences, approach and conversions for running groups of characters that are wildly diverse from entirely different genres and settings. Can you imagine a *pirate queen*, *barbarian warrior*, *Jedi Knight*, *alien superhero* and the

Ghost of Halloween Past teaming up for a **Heroes Unlimited™** adventure? How about an *alien ambassador*, *barbarian warrior*, *Diabolist*, *Succubus* and a *Ghostbuster* in a **Beyond the Supernatural™** game? Julius has, and the games have turned out great. And he shares his thoughts, approaches and tips with you in the article.

Page 26 – Julius' first Megaversal Adventure

Page 27 – Game Mechanics

Page 27 – Personal Energies

Page 28 – Skills

Page 30 – Megaversal Combat

Page 31 – Traversing the Megaverse®

Artwork by *Mark Dudley*.

Page 33 – An Evening at the Improv Table – Official Game Master Tips

Writer and G.M. *Glen Evans* (with asides and comments from *Kevin Siembieda*) offers insight and advice about improvisation at the gaming table, listening to your players and using their words and actions to build adventures you never imagined. Being flexible, inventive and willing to take chances can payoff big. Role-playing games are all about characters and stories. And for Game Masters, that includes being willing to depart from the story you set out to tell and let the characters help shape the story together.

Page 34 – What is a G.M. to do?

Page 36 – That's the way the die bounces

Page 37 – Back to improvising

Artwork by *Kevin Siembieda*.

Page – 41 Yokai of Japan – Optional material for Beyond the Supernatural™

Writer and G.M., *Shawn Merrow*, presents a host of monsters (yokai) of Japan for the modern day setting of **Beyond the Supernatural™**, but also suitable for use in **Rifts®**, **Heroes Unlimited™**, **Nightbane®** and other settings.

Page 41 – Funa-yurei, Ghost Zombies

Page 43 – Hanadaka-tengu, Demon Scholars

Page 44 – Kappa, Sea Imp

Page 45 – Karasu-tengu, Demon Warriors

Page 46 – Kitsune, Trickster Fox

Page 48 – Neko-mata, Spirit Cat

Page 49 – Nue, Air Monkey

Page 50 – Nure-onna, Serpent Woman

Page 52 – Oni, Demon Warriors

Page 53 – Tanuki, Raccoon Prankster

Page 54 – Adventure Ideas

Artwork by *Michael Mumah*.

Page 56 – Aboard the Pearl – Optional setting & adventure ideas for Dead Reign®

Eric Sturm returns with a setting of hope during the Zombie Apocalypse.

Artwork by *Nicholas Bradshaw*.

Page 60 – On a Wing and a Prayer – An Official adventure for Ninjas & Superspies™

The indomitable *Paul Herbert* presents an adventure full of intrigue, spies, secrets, martial arts and danger.

Page 69 – Non-Player Characters Galore!
Artwork by newcomer *Angela Deland*.

Page 86 – I Am Legion

– Official adventure & source material for Splicers®

Chris Kluge and *Charles Walton II* team up to present an episodic adventure ushering in a new rogue Nexus personality, Legion. To her, humans are precious, and she seeks to unify man and machine in her own twisted way. Though Legion desires to bring about the ultimate peace, she only creates more turmoil and bloodshed. Five years in the making. Designed as a special release. Special thanks to *Jeff Ruiz*, *Lance Colley* and *Todd Spencley* for their assistance and input.

Page 89 – The adventure beings ... I Am Legion

Page 98 – Game Master & Source Material

Page 98 – Black Talon War Hawk

Page 101 – Deliveryman O.C.C.

Page 104 – Bombardier O.C.C.

Page 106 – Mantis Cannon

Page 108 – Robots of Legion

Page 108 – Collector

Page 111 – Legionnaire

Page 115 – Fusion Cyborg

Page 117 – Factory Walker

Page 119 – Prisonbot

Page 121 – Non-Player Characters

Page 123 – Great House Deluvane Strike Team

Page 125 – Dreadguard Cameron Morecraft

Page 126 – Packmaster Natasha London

Page 131 – Guthrum Reigns

Page 134 – Creed

Artwork by *Charles Walton II*.

Page 138 – The Town of Semjaw™

– Optional location and adventure ideas for Rifts®

Brett Caron returns to present a town struggling to survive in the wilderness of Canada. Semjaw was a quiet little place until pre-Rifts ruins were discovered. Now ... well, read about it for yourself.

Artwork by *Benjamin Rodriguez*.

Page 144 – Reaper Cell – A short story for Rifts®

Dan Frederick spins a yarn about Coalition black ops, treachery, secret missions and fighting fire with fire. This tale is a prelude to **Secrets of the Coalition States: The Disavowed Sourcebook**, but it is only a hint at what is yet to be revealed in **The Disavowed**. The Coalition States have many dirty tricks and secret operations in play, and Colonel Lyboc has his fingers in many of them.

Artwork by *Michael Leonard*.

Page 220 – Bonus Maps by Will Erwin

This was part of artist Will Erwin's Christmas gift to Palladium Books and our fans. Enjoy.

Page 222 – Happy Holidays from us all

The Theme for Issue 71-72

Uncorking your imagination and bringing characters and ideas into your games from across the Megaverse®. The gamescape of Palladium Books is more than **Rifts®** or **Palladium Fantasy®**. More than **Heroes Unlimited™** and **Nightbane®**. It is all of them. Every setting offering ideas and adventures waiting to be brought

together to create characters and stories unlike anything any other game company has to offer. *2015 – celebrating the 25th Anniversary of Rifts®*.

The Rifter® Needs You

We are always looking for new writers and artists to fill the next issue of **The Rifter®**. You do not need to be a professional writer to contribute to **The Rifter®**. This publication is like a "fanzine," written by fans for fans. A forum in which gamers just like *you* can submit articles, adventures, G.M. advice, player tips, house rules, new magic and monsters, weapons and gear, short stories and more. So think about writing and submitting (even something as small as 4-6 pages). Newcomers and regular contributors are always welcome.

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

The Cover

This cover by **Amy L. Ashbaugh** depicts a Ley Line Walker teleporting onto the back of a predatory dinosaur (or is it a Black Market robot dinosaur?). And who is on whose side? Does it spark an adventure idea?

Optional and Unofficial Rules & Source Material

Please note that most of the material presented in **The Rifter®** is "unofficial" or "optional" rules and source material.

They are alternative ideas, homespun adventures and material mostly created by fellow gamers and fans like you, the reader. Things one can *elect* to include in one's own campaign or simply enjoy reading about. They are not "official" to the main games or world settings.

As for optional tables and adventures, if they sound cool or fun, use them. If they sound funky, too high-powered or inappropriate for your game, modify them or ignore them completely.

All the material in **The Rifter®** has been included for two reasons: One, because we thought it was imaginative and fun, and two, we thought it would stimulate your imagination with fun ideas and concepts that you can use (if you want to), or which might inspire you to create your own wonders.

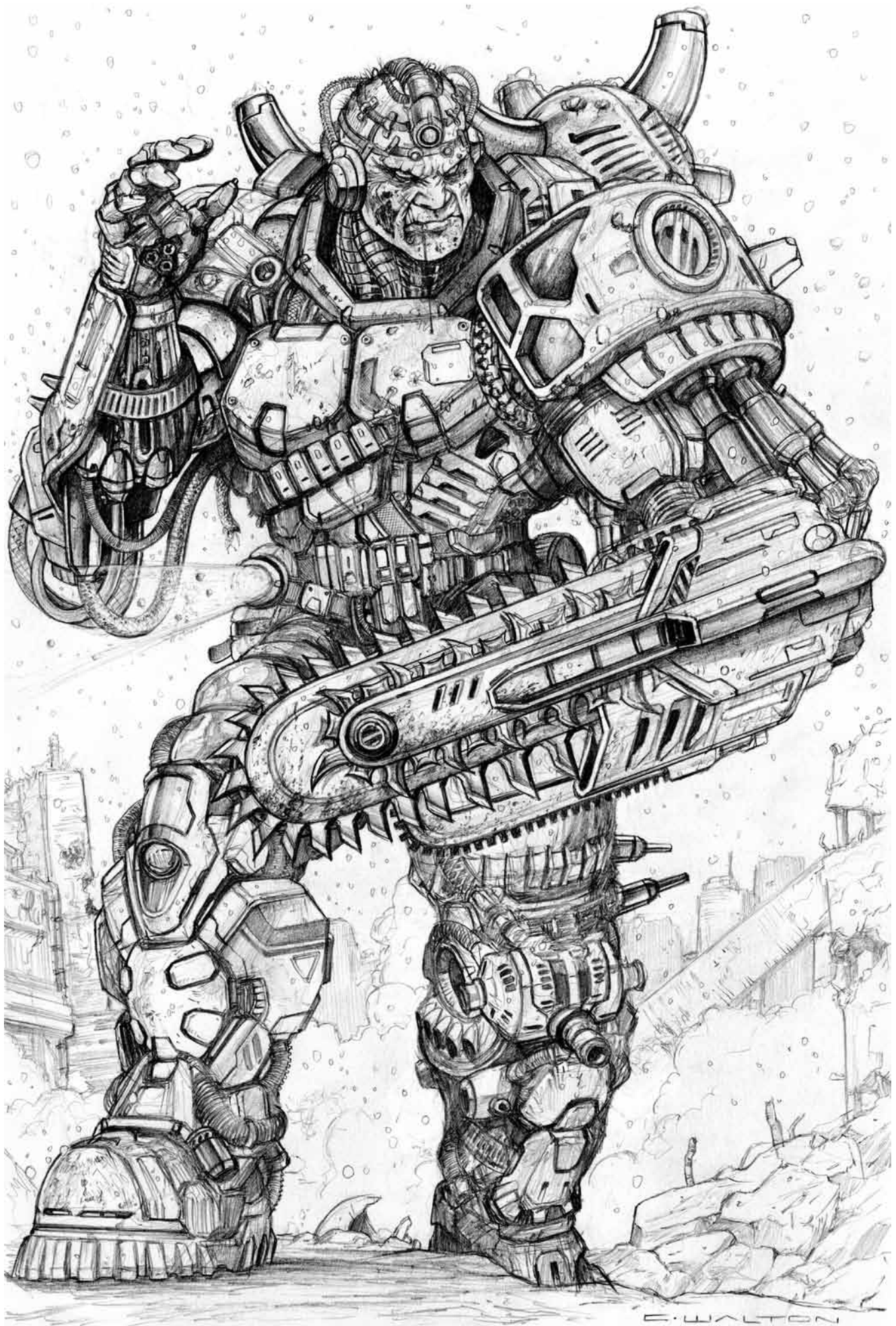
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The Rifter® #73

The Rifter® #73, Winter issue will present a nice variety of new source material for Rifts® and other Palladium RPG settings.

- **Cover by Michael Wilson.**
- **Source material for Rifts®.**
- **More tips for Game Masters by Rosenstein and Siembieda.**
- **Source material for Rifts® and 2-4 other settings.**
- **News, coming attractions and much more.**
- **And maybe YOUR submission. Send us something and see if you get published.**

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



C. WALTON

From the Desk of Kevin Siembieda

Oh where, oh where, has my Rifter been?

A very good question. And before I go on, I want to say we appreciate your understanding and patience over the matter. We are hoping this combined **Rifter® #71 & #72**, double-issue (plus an additional 32 pages) helps to make up for 2015's crazy release schedule. I hope you enjoy it.

We think this double-issue of **The Rifter®** is a nice "mixed bag" of material from gamers and fans like yourself. In fact, if you have ideas for articles, G.M. tips and adventures, please think about sending them in to us. **The Rifter®** is many things: Part fanzine, part talent show, and part place for sharing ideas. You do not need to be a seasoned or accomplished writer to submit your material to **The Rifter®**. As a sort of "fanzine," if the writing is clear and contains good ideas, it has a good shot at making it into an issue. **The Rifter®** has always been meant to be a forum for Palladium Gamers. A place to share your ideas, house rules, and especially your adventures and game settings (towns, cities, dungeons, etc.). Gamers are always looking for new adventure ideas and villains. Share them and get published at the same time. You guys are always telling me about your awesome adventures, villains and campaigns – well, share them with the rest of the world!

Thank you

As I write this, Thanksgiving is in a couple of days and Christmas is only a month away. The last several years have been a challenge both professionally and personally. There have been some wild and scary moments, but we've come out the other side and have high hopes for the future.

I am so grateful for the journey I have traveled and the multitude of people I have met along the way. That very much includes you, our fans around the world. It never ceases to amaze me how deeply and profoundly our little games have touched so many people. What you may not realize is how deeply *you* have touched our hearts as well.

I was recently reminded of that by a new friend in the movie industry. He called to just chat and talk about the current **Rifts®** campaign he's playing in, and gaming in general. Toward the end of the call he talked about how his gaming buddies can't believe he and I are friends, and that he can just pick up the phone and give me a call. I found that ironic, since he's the Hollywood

movie star on the rise, but to him and his gaming crew, I was the celebrity. Funny. He went on to tell me how it was my books and his years of playing Palladium role-playing games – most notably the **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles® RPG**, **After the Bomb®** and **Rifts®** – that helped instill in him a love for storytelling and playing the role of different characters. That it was my work that helped to inspire him to embark on a career in film. He had told me this before, but this time there was something about the warmth and sincerity of his words and joyful tone that struck a deeper chord with me. It came at a good time, too. I had been feeling quite depressed and his words and warmth help snap me out of it.

He reminded me of the fun and joy I have brought to millions of gamers. A fact that is so very, very humbling. As a poor kid growing up on the wrong side of the tracks in Detroit, all I ever wanted to do was to draw and write, and tell stories. To have my voice heard and be appreciated – to bring joy and laughter to others and inflame their imaginations so they may create and tell their own stories – it's amazing. I can't even find the words to appropriately describe it. I'm living my dream and touching and inspiring the hearts and minds of other dreamers. Wow. And as a publisher, I've been able to help other wonderful and talented artists and writers behind the creation of our games to unleash their imaginations and in so doing, inflame yours. The people I work with are wonderful souls I am very proud to know and even more proud to call my friends. And over the past three and a half decades, I have met so many kind, generous gamers from around the globe, some of whom I can also call my friends. Thank you for bringing laughter and joy into my life. My career. My passion.

As Thanksgiving approaches, I thank God for the wonder of the life I have led. And for giving me an overactive imagination that I love, and the talents to put it to good use.

Merry Christmas and happy holidays from me and the entire Palladium crew. May the holiday season be full of joy and laughter, and the New Year filled with triumph and prosperity for us all. Stay healthy and happy, hug those you love, and keep those beautiful imaginations burning bright.

– With Love – Kevin Siembieda, November 23, 2015



Palladium News

By Kevin Siembieda, the guy who should know

It's Christmas Grab Bag Time!

You know, that offer where you can get \$90-\$100 worth of products for only \$42 plus shipping and handling. Ask for autographs and available staff will sign each book in your Christmas Surprise Package. A great gift for that special gamer in your life, or divide up what you get from one Surprise Package as gifts for several of your gamer pals. This is also a wonderful way to try new settings and to fill in holes in your collection. Every year for the last 16 or 17 years now, Palladium Books has offered a **Christmas Surprise Package** as our way of saying "thank you" to our fans and helping to make your Christmas a little more special.

And because this issue of **The Rifter®** is shipping in December, any Surprise Package order dated before **January 15, 2016**, will be honored, packed up and shipped out to you. Happy Holidays. **Note:** See complete details on how to order elsewhere in this issue.

What's been going on?

The year has just flown by for us. Spring and Summer, the Open House and convention season, they are all a distant blur. The Fall has been packed with long hours as we worked on pounding out **Rifts® Chaos Earth® Resurrection™** (a new and awesome release), this double issue of **The Rifter®** and getting several other RPG books in the pipeline for early 2016 release!

By the time this double issue of **The Rifter®** reaches you, **Chaos Earth® Resurrection™** will be on store shelves and **Rifts® The Coalition States: Heroes of Humanity™ sourcebook** and **The Rifter® #73** should be about ready to go to the printer (both are slated as January, 2016 releases). **Rifts® Secrets of the Coalition States®: The Disavowed™** should be hot on their heels (February release), and, with any luck, a Palladium Fantasy sourcebook I've been kicking around for awhile (sorry, it's not Land of the Damned Three, but I have ideas for that as well). Check out the *Coming Attractions* in this issue for complete details on these new titles and other upcoming RPG books.

Back in print! A number of out of print titles are *back in stock* in time to ring in the New Year. Take particular note of the first three in the list as they have been out of print for some time. We are very pleased they are back in the roster.

- **Rifts® Adventure Sourcebook 1: Chi-Town 'Burbs™: Forbidden Knowledge™**
- **Rifts® Cyber-Knights™ Sourcebook**
- **Palladium Fantasy® Sourcebook: Island at the Edge of the World™**
- **Palladium Fantasy® Sourcebook: Adventures on the High Seas™**
- **Heroes Unlimited™ Sourcebook: Aliens Unlimited™**
- **Rifts® World Book 29: Madhaven™**
- **Rifts® World Book 22: Free Quebec™**
- **Rifts® World Book 8: Japan**
- **Rifts® Sourcebook 3: Mindwerks™**
- **Rifts® Dimension Book™ 5: Anvil Galaxy™**

A part of 2015 has been spent reexamining where Palladium is at, where we're going, and what we need to be doing to get there. We've been considering a wide range of opportunities and we are working toward several things that should help move the company forward. Doing more licenses and getting into new markets is certainly part of that plan.

One of the projects on the front burner, of course, is **Robotech® RPG Tactics™**. Other new releases in the pipeline for 2016 include **Rifts® Coalition States: Heroes of Humanity™** (early January), **Rifts® The Disavowed™** (February), **Rifts® Chaos Earth® First Responders™**, **Rifts® Secrets of the Atlanteans™**, **Rifts® Sovietski™**, and sourcebooks for **Splicers®**, **Palladium Fantasy RPG®, Heroes Unlimited™**, **Robotech®** and **Beyond the Supernatural™**. And a few surprises. I had delusions of getting the first four titles out this year, but it ain't gonna happen. However, I'm working toward fast and early 2016 releases. There is already work underway on **Coalition States: Heroes of Humanity™** and **The Disavowed™**. I've also quietly been outlining and making notes for a surprise **Palladium Fantasy® sourcebook**. Sorry, it's not Land of the Damned™ Three, but I've been thinking about that, too, as well as the **Beyond the Supernatural™** sourcebooks.

UPDATE: Robotech® RPG Tactics™

Robotech® RPG Tactics™ is a top priority for 2016 as we plan to relaunch the game line with the release of Wave Two items. While it is true that we have other obligations we must also address, and we are not focused on **Robotech® RPG Tactics™** every minute of every day, that doesn't mean we're not working on RRT! It is constantly on our minds and IS a top priority. We are talking about it, going over plans and exploring options, and working on ways to make the 2016 relaunch awesome. Our goal is to make **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Wave Two** everything it can be, and more. We look forward to putting Wave Two in your hands next year, and giving you the next generations of Robotech® mecha and adventures. We love **Robotech®** and appreciate the thousands of fans and Kickstarter backers. We want to regroup and make this game great. And that's exactly what we are working at doing.

Rifts® Savage Worlds – Coming in 2016

That deal I mentioned last issue, about another role-playing game company adapting the **Rifts® Earth** setting to its popular RPG system of rules, is signed and production of the Core Rule Book, a Players' Guide and a Creature Compendium is well underway. The company is Pinnacle Entertainment and the game system is **Savage Worlds**.

Excitement about this game release is high, prompting hopes for a 2015 release. However, everyone involved wants a quality product, so **Rifts® Savage Worlds** has been pushed back into 2016. We don't have a problem with that, because we want to see a fun, solid game line come out of this.

We would love to see more licensing deals like this, and not just for **Rifts®**. We have been talking with a few other companies about similar opportunities, and there are two that we are excited about, but it is way too soon to discuss them at this time.

2016 Conventions

Right now, we know we'll be at AdeptiCon, Anime North and Gen Con, in that order. We may add a few others to the list, but we need to focus on product releases, **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Wave Two** in particular.

Palladium PDFs available on DriveThruRPG.com

More than 120 Palladium game titles are waiting for you in PDF form on DriveThruRPG.com. We have added many **Rifts® World Books** and **Dimension Books**, the **Minion War™** series, all of the **Dead Reign®** (Zombie Apocalypse) books, plus **Heroes Unlimited™**, **Palladium Fantasy RPG®**, **The Mecha-noids®**, **Splicers®**, **The Rifter®** and much more are available on **DriveThruRPG.com**.

Available right now:

- **Rifts® Chaos Earth® Resurrection** sourcebook will be made available after the book ships in a few weeks, but two sneak previews of it are available now, as well as free previews of many other titles.
- **A Rifts® Novella, PDF only.**
- **The Rifter® #1-64** are now available, with more to come.
- **All Rifts® Chaos Earth® titles** are available.
- **Rifts® Coalition Wars®: Siege on Tolkeen series** – all six titles.
- **Rifts® The Minion War™ series** – six current books – consisting of **Dimension Book 10: Hades**, **Dimension Book 11: Dyval**, **Dimension Book 12: Dimensional Outbreak**, **HU2 adventure sourcebook: Armageddon Unlimited™**, **Heroes of the Megaverse®**, and **Rifts® Megaverse® in Flames** available now! Suitable for ALL settings, including **Rifts®**, **Heroes Unlimited™** and **The Palladium Fantasy RPG®**.
- **Dead Reign® RPG titles.** The **Zombie Apocalypse** is yours to role-play with the **Dead Reign® RPG**. The core rule book and all sourcebooks are available now.
- **FREE Robotech® RPG Tactics™ paper game pieces**, force organization tables, stat cards, rules and special items – coming soon!
- **FREE 12 highly-detailed, comprehensive Robotech® RPG Tactics™ assembly instructions** for all the **Wave One mecha** – available now.
- **FREE Robotech® RPG Tactics™ color guides** are available now.
- **Palladium Fantasy RPG® Paper Miniatures** – Volumes #1-6 are available now. More are coming in the weeks ahead.
- **120+ Palladium titles, plus G.M. kits and more.**
- **Much more to come in the weeks and months ahead.**

Behind the Scenes

A number of things have been percolating behind the scenes, but they are all in a state of transition and development, so we can't really discuss them. There are often strategic reasons we can't talk about things in motion. Sometimes because the possibilities keep changing, or it's too soon to name potential partners, especially if things don't work out or those partners change. But if things go our way for a change, 2016 could be a big, transitional year for us.

Coming Attractions

Palladium's 2015 Release Checklist

New and Notable Products – ALL Available Now

- **Rifts® Chaos Earth® Resurrection™**
- **Rifts® Chaos Earth®: Rise of Magic™**
- **Robotech®: Expeditionary Force Marines™**
- **Bizantium & the Northern Islands™**
- **The Rifter® #71 & #72 Double Issue**
- **The Rifter® #70**
- **The Rifter® #69**
- **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Boxed Game**
- **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Expansion Packs**
- **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Rulebook**

Back in Print and ALL Available Now

- **Palladium Fantasy® Sourcebook: Island at the Edge of the World™**
- **Palladium Fantasy® Sourcebook: Adventures on the High Seas™**
- **Heroes Unlimited™ Sourcebook: Aliens Unlimited™**
- **Rifts® WB 21: Splynn Dimensional Market™**
- **Rifts® Dimension Book™ 5: Anvil Galaxy™**
- **Rifts® Game Master Guide**
- **Rifts® Book of Magic**
- **Rifts® Cyber-Knights™ Sourcebook**
- **Rifts® World Book 29: Madhaven™**
- **Rifts® World Book 22: Free Quebec™**
- **Rifts® World Book 8: Japan**
- **Rifts® Sourcebook 3: Mindwerks™**
- **Rifts® Adventure Sourcebook 1: Chi-Town 'Burbs™: Forbidden Knowledge™**

January 2016 Releases

- **The Rifter® #73**
- **Rifts® Heroes of Humanity™**

Coming in 2016

- **Rifts® The Disavowed™**
- **Rifts® Secrets of the Atlanteans™**
- **Rifts® Chaos Earth® Sourcebook: First Responders**
- **The Rifter® #74**
- **Dead Reign® Sourcebook 6: Hell Followed™**
- **Palladium Fantasy® Sourcebooks**
- **More Rifts® Sourcebooks**
- **Splicers® Sourcebooks**
- **Heroes Unlimited™ Sourcebook (tentative)**
- **Beyond the Supernatural™ Sourcebook: Beyond Arcanum™**
- **Beyond the Supernatural™ Sourcebook: Tomes Grotesque™**
- **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Wave Two Expansion Packs**
- **Some BIG announcements and a few surprises.**

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

Ordering from Palladium Books: You can also order directly from Palladium Books, but you will pay extra for shipping. For customers with access to a computer, we highly recommend ordering online. This provides you with information about the most recent releases and Palladium's entire product catalog. It also provides you the most accurate shipping costs and more shipping options. You can also order by telephone; 734-721-2903 (order line only). For customers without such access, use the following "mail order" process.

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

2. **In the USA:** Add \$6 for orders totaling \$1-\$50 to cover shipping and handling. Add \$12 for orders totaling \$51-\$95. Add \$18 for orders totaling \$96-\$200. **Note:** For *non-book products*, including the **Robotech® RPG Tactics™** box game and expansion packs, add an extra \$6 per \$50 worth of product, on top of the shipping amounts listed above. This is because *non-book products* cannot ship via Media Mail, and must use a more expensive method of shipping. **Outside the USA:** Double the shipping amount for orders going to Canada, and *quadruple* it for overseas orders. Any and all additional costs incurred as a result of customs fees and taxes are the responsibility of the foreign customer, NOT Palladium Books.

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

4. Please make sure to send us your complete and correct address, *including* apartment number. **Note:** These costs are for the least expensive and slowest method of shipping only. Allow 2-4 weeks for delivery. Order online or call the office for a superior but more costly shipping method.

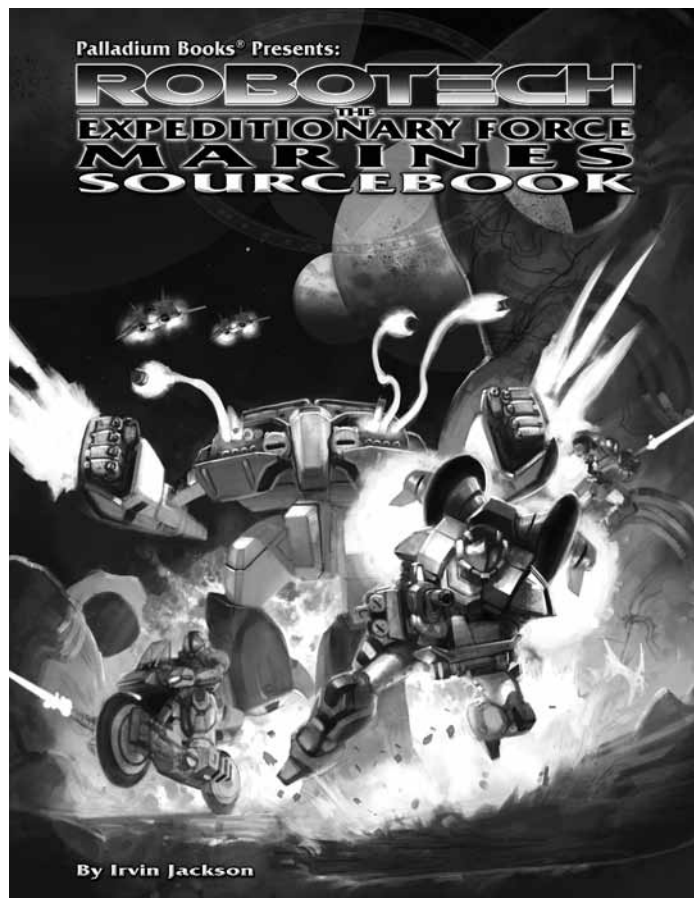
NEW! Available Now:

Robotech®: Expeditionary Force Marines™ Sourcebook

The **Robotech®: Expeditionary Force Marines Sourcebook** is set in space with the UEEF (United Earth Expeditionary Force) led by Admiral Rick Hunter, Lisa Hayes, Breetai and Exedore. This valiant force of mecha-clad heroes travel across the galaxy liberating planets from the bondage of the Invid Regent, the Robotech Masters and other tyrants and monsters. New alien people are introduced and become part of the Expeditionary Force Marines. In between their ongoing war with the Regent and his Invid and Inorganics, they explore planets, battle space pirates and face treachery on many fronts.

Characters pilot the early Cyclones and next generation of Destroids in a campaign to liberate alien worlds and engage the merciless Invid Regent, his Inorganic shock troopers and Invid swarms. Epic, planet-hopping adventure awaits.

- 5 new Marine O.C.C.s, 22 M.O.S. skill packages, and some new skills.
- 8 new Destroids, two of them Zentraedi, plus a Battloid or two.
- 6 new Cyclones, including Space Cyclones, the Spider Hover Cyclone, the Walker and more.



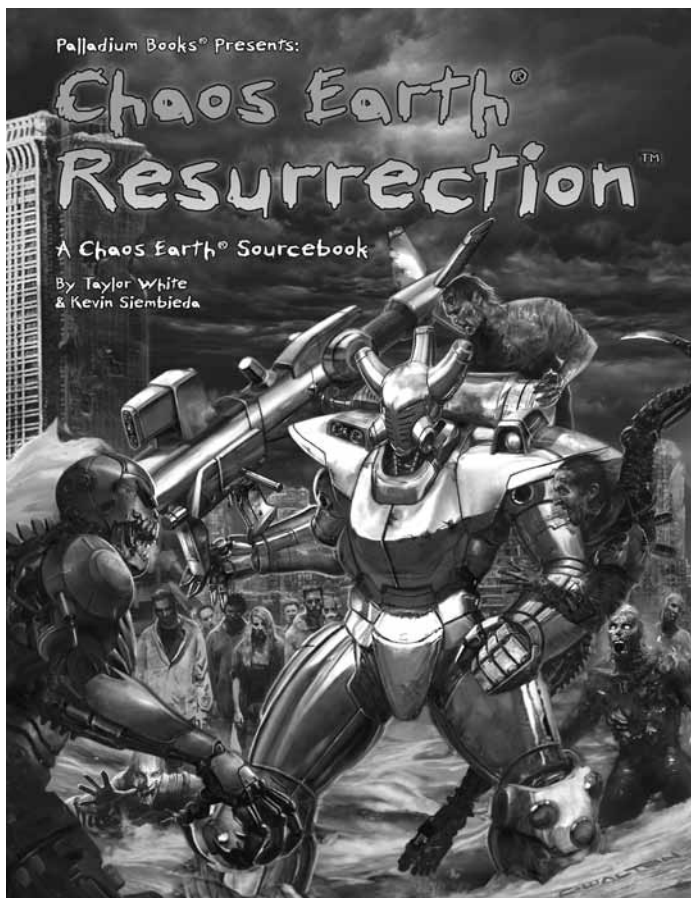
- CVR-1 and CVR-2 body armor and notable Expeditionary Force (and alien) weapons, gear and vehicles.
- The Regent's war machine: Invid Scientist R.C.C., Invid Assault Trooper (new), Invid Fury (new), Invid Ogre (new), Invid Ranger (new), Garn Inorganic (new), the Regent's staffed out, and more.
- 6 alien races and brief overviews of their planets.
- 34 Perytonian Energy Wizard magic spells.
- Quick Roll Creation Tables for UEEF Marines as player characters.
- Time-line for the Expeditionary Force and related events on Earth.
- The **Robotech® The Shadow Chronicles® RPG** "rule book" is needed to play (Cat. No. 550 or 550HC).
- Art by Charles Walton, Mike Wilson, Apollo Okamura, Allen & Brian Manning, Ben Rodriguez and Dan Dussault.
- Written by Irvin Jackson and Kevin Siembieda.
- 160 pages – \$20.95 retail – Cat. No. 553. Available now.

NEW! Available Now:

Rifts® Chaos Earth® Resurrection™

The Golden Age of Science and human civilization is shattered with the return of magic and the Coming of the Rifts. Overnight, human civilization is toppled. Many major cities are wiped from the face of the Earth. Humanity struggles to survive against impossible odds and the demonic horrors, aliens and monsters emerging from the Rifts.

Now comes the first invasion from another world. Its army? The corpses of our own dead, deliberately reanimated to become



an invasion force to conquer the living. A growing number are *mechanized zombies* – nightmarish creations with multiple body parts and armor and weapons bolted right onto their bodies. Unless stopped, they could wipe out all human life.

- **Do you hear the Transmission? If you do, it may drive you mad.**
- **Chaos Zombies rise to slaughter the living.**
- **12 different mechanized Scrap Zombies soon join their ranks.**
- **Frankenstein amalgamations, *Scrap Zombies* are armored and weaponized in ways never before imagined. They stalk the ruins of civilization and battle power-armored troops in a death match humanity must win.**
- **Amped Zombies are fast and deadly.**
- **Boogeymen lurk in the shadows to pick off the living one by one.**
- **Brain Melters are dead Crazies who use their powers to hunt the living and locate them for the zombie hordes.**
- **Garbagemen gather the dead, extra body parts and special components.**
- **Headbangers are horrific and deadly with multiple heads and long-range weapons.**
- **Living Dead Girls are the infiltrators who look normal but are zombie saboteurs and assassins.**
- **Reapers are armored, fast and deadly.**
- **Scorchers are walking time bombs.**
- **Soldier Boys are the backbone of the Scrap Zombies.**
- **Stitchers rebuild and repair the zombies in the field.**
- **Chaos Zombies, Toxic Vomitous, Walking Nightmares and more.**

- **Zombie Mistakes and Quirks Tables.**
- **The Black Obelisk, a zombie factory, a mad man and dark magic.**
- **More monsters and plagues from beyond the Rifts.**
- **Suitable for use in *Rifts*®, *Heroes Unlimited*™ and other RPG worlds.**
- **Written by Taylor White and Kevin Siembieda.**
- **160 pages (increased size) – \$20.95 retail (increased price) – Cat. No. 666 – Available now.**

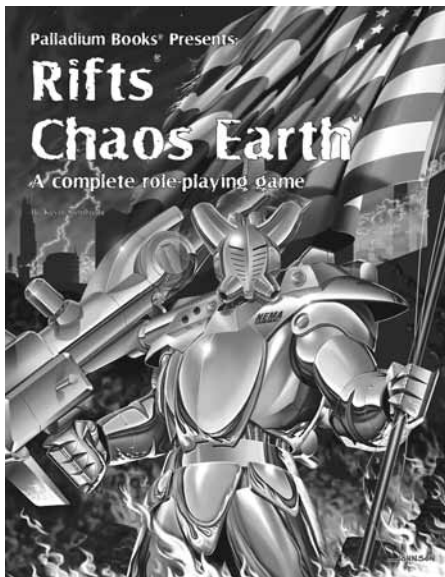


Rifts® Chaos Earth® Sourcebook Two

Rise of Magic™ – Back in print

In the *Rifts*® *Chaos Earth*® series, you play through the Great Cataclysm as the apocalypse happens. In *Rifts*® *Chaos Earth*®: *Rise of Magic*™, humans, particularly children, are discovering they can draw upon mystic energy and cast magic. The thing is, they don't really know what they are doing. Magic is just part of the chaos and the impossible that is happening all around them. Meanwhile, others have found they can summon and control monsters and demons, while still others make pacts with supernatural beings to become witches and worse. And some have learned they can harness the magic to animate and command the dead. Madness and more chaos ensues. All of this only complicates things for NEMA, Earth's defenders, as the line of distinction between "good guys" and "bad guys" begins to blur, and things go from bad to worse.

- **Chaos Magic, new magic specific to the *Chaos Earth*® setting.**
- **100+ unique Chaos Magic spells.**
- **New magic O.C.C.s like the Blue Zone Wizard and Chaos Wizard.**
- **New evil magic users like the Chaos Witch and Demon Caller.**
- **More on NEMA and the Demon Plagues.**
- **Written by Kevin Siembieda.**
- **Two new *Chaos Earth*® sourcebooks are coming soon.**
- **64 pages – \$12.95 – Cat. No. 662. Available now!**



Chaos Earth® RPG – Available now

The origins of **Rifts®** start here! You play survivors or the heroes of **NEMA**. The men and women of the Northern Eagle Military Alliance equipped with their *Chromium Guardsmen* (Glitter Boys), *Silver Eagles* (SAMAS) and a host of other robots and power armor to stand against a rising tide of enemies and alien invaders. They are humanity's last and only hope to survive the apocalypse that will become known as the Great Cataclysm. These are the heroes you play in a world that can only be described as *Chaos Earth*.

- Overview of the Great Cataclysm as it unfolds.
- Introduction to NEMA and its weapons and resources.
- 11 different character classes, including robot pilots, the Para-Arcane, Demon and Witch Hunters, Chromium Guardsmen, & more.
- Weapons, robots, power armor, vehicles and equipment.
- Monsters, chaos and adventure. Written by Kevin Siembieda.
- 160 pages. A complete RPG – \$20.95 – Cat. No. 660 – Available now!
- *Chaos Earth® Sourcebook 1: Creatures of Chaos™* – 30+ Chaos Demons, NEMA and more. \$12.95 – 64 pages – Cat. No. 661 – Available now.

COMING in 2016:

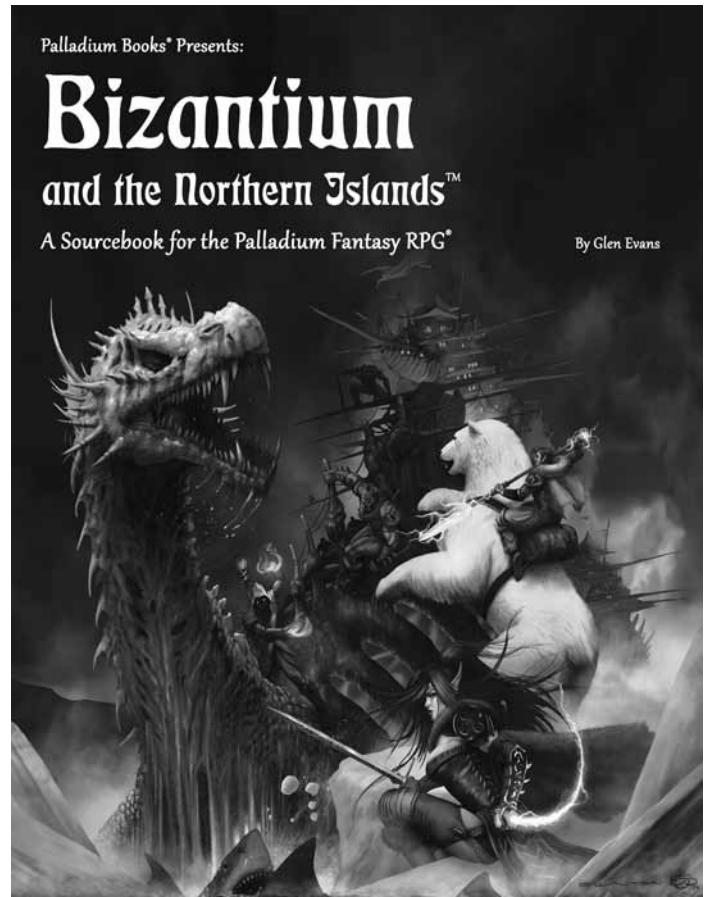
Rifts® Chaos Earth® Sourcebook:

First Responders

The Great Cataclysm has devastated civilization, but humanity fights for survival. The struggles of civilian law enforcement, fire and rescue, and everyday men and women are some of the most epic tales to be told in a world gone to hell. They fight monsters, aliens, the paranormal, the elements, and each other, all with the hope of reclaiming their lives from the Chaos.

- New D-Bees and monsters from the Rifts.
- First Responder O.C.C.s, skills and special equipment.
- New “average citizen” Occupational Character Classes (O.C.C.s).
- New equipment for NEMA “Roscoes” and other emergency personnel.

- Notable rescue vehicles, robot drones, and technology.
- Source information and stats for common Golden Age technology (weapons, vehicles, medical tech, etc.).
- Apocalypse Plagues brought from other worlds to Chaos Earth.
- Adventure ideas and more.
- Written by Jason Richards. Additional text by Clements & Siembieda.
- 96 pages – \$16.95 retail – Cat. No. 665.



Available Now:

Palladium Fantasy RPG® Sourcebook:

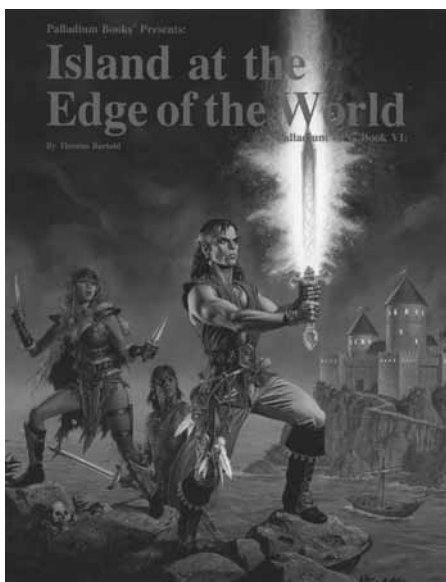
Bizantium and the Northern Islands™

To the civilized world, Bizantium and the waters and lands around it are frightening. A realm of sea serpents, monsters, and barbarians. To the heroes and people who live there, it is a realm of adventure, beauty and opportunity.

North of Bizantium is the Icy Ocean and Great Ice Shelf, places where only a handful of the bravest Bizantian sailors have ever set sail, and the rest of the world *knows nothing* about. For kingdoms in the south, only a few scholars have ever heard of the Great Ice Shelf or the cannibalistic Necromancers known as the Iceborn who make the frozen wasteland their home. Those who have heard tales of the land of ice and death are convinced they are nothing but the stuff of myth. Very soon, they will find out otherwise.

And these are but a few of the revelations presented in **Bizantium and the Northern Islands™**. Discover for yourself the wonders and horrors that await.

- **Waterchanter O.C.C. and 20+ magic spells new to the Fantasy setting.**
- **Necromancy revisited. Many spells new to the Fantasy setting.**
- **90+ spells in all, Ocean Magic, Necromancy and more.**
- **Serpent Chaser, Bizantium Marine & other new character classes.**
- **The Iceborn Raiders, Skinbinders and Sea Witches. A forgotten race of monsters who worship death, wield death magic, hunt humanoids, eat their flesh, and wear their skin. A villain you will love to hate.**
- **The Iceborn's Necroilus – massive vessels made from the remains of dead sea serpents and animated by Necromancy to prowl the seas.**
- **Vengeful gods, monsters and Sea Monster creation tables.**
- **The Seven Treasures, lost for centuries, waiting to be found.**
- **New and old Bizantium ships, new weapons and gear.**
- **Bizantium and the Northern Islands as never before revealed.**
- **The Great Ice Shelf – a new continent to explore.**
- **Bizantium history, society, culture, and notable places.**
- **Adventure hooks galore, and more.**
- **Written by Glen Evans, Matthew Clements and Kevin Siembieda.**
- **192 pages – \$24.95 retail – Cat. No. 474 – Available NOW!**



Available Now:

Island at the Edge of the World™

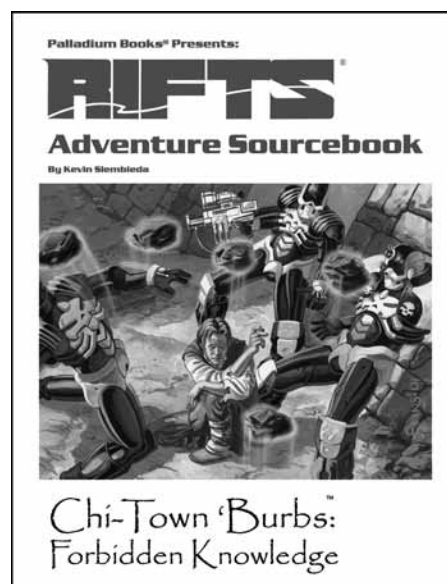
A Palladium Fantasy RPG® Sourcebook

You demanded it, so we have brought **Island at the Edge of the World™** back in stock as a short run, special printing. This is the original Palladium RPG® sourcebook VI that utilizes First Edition rules. That said, it is very easy to adapt for use with Second Edition rules.

Island at the Edge of the World™ reveals some of the little known history of the Palladium World, the Time of a Thousand Magicks, the Changeling Inquisition, and dark secrets that could threaten the world. Learn about forgotten Crystal Magic (as pow-

erful as Rune Weapons), the Church of Scar, the legendary Circle of Absolute Elemental Power, and frightening prophecies about the end of the world.

- **The hidden Crystal Forest and Crystal Palace.**
- **The Psychic Science of Magic and Crystals.**
- **New magic weapons and items.**
- **The Town of a Dozen Fracts, an adventure setting.**
- **The Silent Forest adventure.**
- **Quest for the Tombs adventure.**
- **The Old Kingdom Mountains and adventures.**
- **The Valley at the Top of the World, an adventure setting.**
- **The Island at the Edge of the World, an adventure setting.**
- **Ancient ruins and additional places, people and secrets of note.**
- **Written by Thomas Bartold. Additional text by Kevin Siembieda.**
- **First Edition rules. Requires some modification to use with Palladium Fantasy RPG®, Second Edition.**
- **144 pages – \$20.95 – Cat. No. 458. Available now.**



Rifts® Adventure Sourcebook One:

Chi-Town 'Burbs, Forbidden Knowledge™

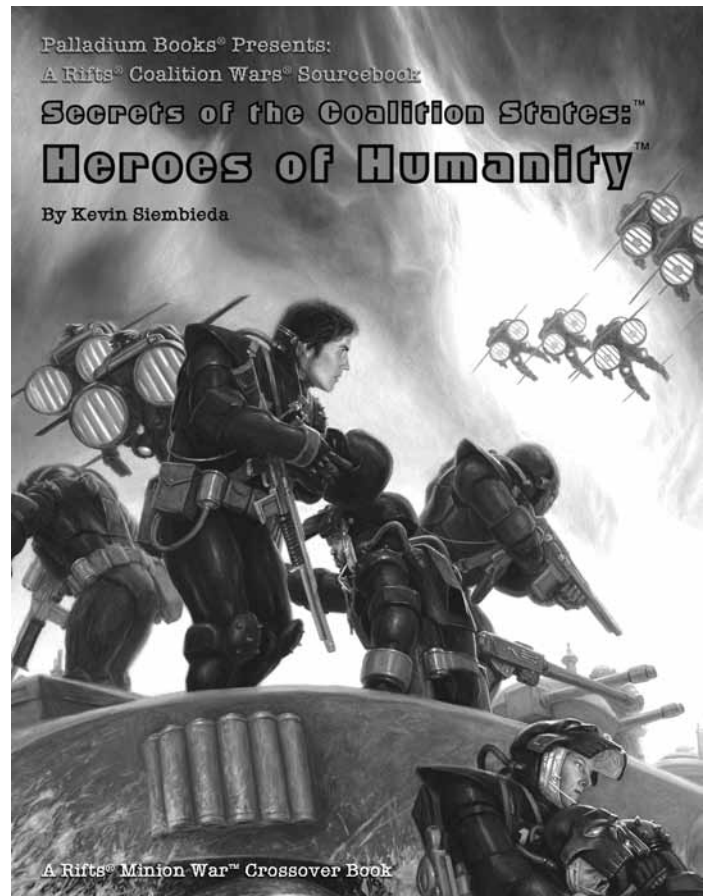
Back in print at last! This popular sourcebook is back by popular demand. It includes an overview and history of the Chi-Town 'Burbs, and key places and people in the Firetown 'Burb, which means plenty of adventure and intrigue, villains and rumors in the shadow of Chi-Town. Beware the Coalition. They have eyes everywhere.

- **An overview of Old Towns, New Towns and Shanty Town 'Burbs.**
- **Unsavory and illegal activity, shakedowns and statistics.**
- **Forbidden knowledge – outlawed by the Coalition States.**
- **The 'Burb of Firetown, mapped and described.**
- **Notable people and places. Adventure ideas.**
- **Written by Kevin Siembieda.**
- **48 pages – \$9.95 – Cat. No. 853 – available now.**

Also Back in Stock – available now

A number of book titles had slipped temporarily out of print, and a few, like the **Rifts® Adventure Sourcebook One: Chi-Town ‘Burbs: Forbidden Knowledge™**, had been out of print for more than a year. Well, they are back in stock and available now. And because you demanded it, the original **Island at the Edge of the World™**, **Palladium Fantasy RPG® sourcebook** has been brought back as a special, short-run printing. See the full description, above.

- **Adventures on the High Seas™ – a Palladium Fantasy RPG® sourcebook – 224 pages – \$24.95 – Cat. No. 455** – 13 O.C.C.s including the Gladiator, Bard, Necromancer, Shaman and Pirates, 24 character sheets, islands and sea ports of infamy (including the Isle of the Cyclops), Necromancy magic, ships of the world, ship combat, many maps, and adventure ideas. Available now.
- **Aliens Unlimited – a Heroes Unlimited™ Sourcebook – 208 pages – \$24.95 – Cat. No. 515** – 85 alien races, 15 monsters, plus NPC villains, galactic organizations, 90 weapons and equipment, UFO watch groups, rules for creating aliens, super abilities, spell magic and more! Available now.
- **Rifts® Cyber-Knights™ Sourcebook – 112 pages – \$16.95 – Cat. No. 842** – Everything you ever wanted to know about Cyber-Knights: Their training, Cyber-Knight Zen Combat, psychology, special powers, different types of Knights, squires, Fallen Cyber-Knights, Lord Coake (founder and leader of the Knights), quests, adventure hooks, great artwork and more. Available now.
- **Rifts® World Book 29: Madhaven™ – 128 pages – \$16.95 – Cat. No. 869** – 18 monsters/ghosts, 8 mutant R.C.C.s, 4 new heroic O.C.C.s, TW devices, the Knights of the White Rose™, the secrets of the healing White Rose, overview of the ruins of Manhattan, adventures ideas and more. Available now.
- **Rifts® World Book 22: Free Quebec™ – 192 pages – \$24.95 – Cat. No. 837** – The independent kingdom of Free Quebec, its Glitter Boy legions, Glitter Girl and other variant Glitter Boys, weapons, power armor, vehicles, equipment, Quebec cyborgs, the Quebec navy and military, key people, key places, and more. Available now.
- **Rifts® World Book 8: Japan – 216 pages – \$24.95 – Cat. No. 818** – 20 O.C.C.s including the Samurai, Ninja, Cyber-Samurai, Cyberoid, Demon Queller, and Dragon Cyborgs! Tons of weapons and equipment, living Samurai Swords, Rune Weapons, Japanese demons, the Glitter Boy and technology of the Republic of Japan, the ways of the traditional New Empire, and much more. Available now.
- **Rifts® Sourcebook 3: Mindwerks™ – 112 pages – \$16.95 – Cat. No. 812** – The Angel of Death, Gene-Splicers and their creations, Mindwerks cyborgs, new monsters, the Brodkil Empire, Gargoyles, the Millennium Tree of Darkness, weapons, equipment, the Kingdom of Poland, epic adventure and more. A companion for **Triax and the NGR™** and **Warlords of Russia™**. Available now.
- **Rifts® Dimension Book 5: Anvil Galaxy™ – 160 pages – \$20.95 – Cat. No. 847** – 20+ alien races, civilizations, scores of planets of note, legends of the Cosmic Forge, Cosmo-Knights, the Threshold, planet creation rules and more. Available now.



Coming 2016:

Rifts® The Coalition States™ – Heroes of Humanity™

The events unfolding in **World Book 35: Megaverse® in Flames** threaten to change the entire landscape of Rifts® Earth as the demonic minions of Hades and Dyval seek to bring Hell on Earth and turn the planet into a dimensional gateway to Armageddon!

The Coalition States, along with Northern Gun and Lazlo, take the lead in the defense of North America. **Heroes of Humanity** explores the good and bad in the Coalition's efforts to save humanity and send this new threat back to the pits of Hell.

- **New Coalition weapons, armor and war machines.**
- **The Coalition States: Are they heroes or villains? Or does it depend on whether you are human or not?**
- **Can the CS fight alongside mages and D-Bees if it means saving the world?**
- **How is the CS dealing with the Minion War on Earth?**
- **One plan to battle the Xiticix and who really pays the price.**
- **Adventure ideas and more.**
- **Written by Kevin Siembieda, Matthew Clements and contributors.**
- **Final page count and cost yet to be determined but probably 96 pages – \$16.95 retail – Cat. No. 889. January, 2016. In production.**

Coming 2016:

Rifts® Secrets of the Coalition States: The Disavowed

“Desperate times require desperate measures. War has nothing to do with morality or justice. It’s all about winning or dying. We cannot bind our hands with high ideals, even our own, or worry about the laws of renegade nations or the rights of alien people. We must fight fire with fire. And you are the match.”

– Colonel Lyboc addressing a Disavowed team

The Disavowed are so Top Secret that their existence is known only to a handful of the Coalition States’ most elite, top echelon, with *Joseph Prosek II* the mastermind behind the Disavowed operation, and Colonel Lyboc its shadowy face. Find out who these men and women are. How the Disavowed get away with using magic, traveling to other parts of Rifts Earth and even to other dimensions in pursuit of enemies and strategic information that cannot be had through conventional means. Learn about the secret parameters in which these hard-boiled warriors, secretly hand-picked by Joseph Prosek II, operate, why almost every mission is considered a suicide mission, and why they must forever be the Disavowed.

- CS operatives so secret that even the top military and political leaders right up to Emperor Prosek *know nothing about them*. And if they did know, would they condone their activity or condemn it?
- Are the Disavowed heroes or renegades? Assassins or soldiers? Madmen or super-patriots? Or a little of them all?
- Unsung heroes who keep the CS safe, or thugs and pawns of a shadow agency within the Coalition government?
- What role does the Vanguard play in this group?
- How do they reward their D-Bee “teammates” when the mission is over?
- What happens to the Disavowed when they have seen or learned too much? Adventure ideas galore and so much more.
- Written by Kevin Siembieda and Matthew Clements.
- Final page count and cost yet to be determined, but probably 96 pages – \$16.95 retail – Cat. No. 892. Early 2016.

Coming 2016:

Rifts® Secrets of the Atlanteans

True Atlanteans are descendants from Earth’s past. The survivors of the sinking of Atlantis (really a dimensional mishap) and travelers of the Megaverse, wielders of Tattoo Magic and other lost mystic arts. Most people regard them as heroes, but are they? The Sunaj Assassins are mythic villains feared by all, yet they too are True Atlanteans who serve dark forces.

For the first time, much of the story behind True Atlanteans and their secrets are revealed.

- True Atlanteans revisited.
- Optional Atlantean character creation tables including clan heritage and other factors.
- Secrets of the stone pyramids, different types/purposes and powers.
- Many new magic tattoos, magic spells, weapons and armor.

- Atlantean hideouts and secret communities across the Megaverse.
- The Sunaj Assassins, their secrets, history and plans for the future.
- Atlantean Monster Hunter O.C.C., Atlantean Defender O.C.C. and much more. And this is just the tip of what this book contains.
- Written by Carl Gleba. Additional text and ideas by Kevin Siembieda.
- Final page count and cost yet to be determined, but probably 160-192 pages – \$20.95-24.95 retail – Cat. No. 890. Spring 2016.

The Rifter® #73

Every issue of **The Rifter®** is an *idea factory* that helps players and Game Masters to generate new ideas and keep their games fresh. It provides useful, ready to go, source material gamers can just drop into their ongoing games. A doorway to new possibilities and numerous Palladium role-playing worlds. It offers new characters, O.C.C.s, powers, magic, weapons, adventure and ideas for your games. It presents new villains, monsters and dangers to battle, and new ideas to consider. Every issue has material for **Rifts®** and at least two or three other Palladium game lines.

The Rifter® #73 – Winter, 2016:

- Rifts® source material.
- Optional source material for 2-5 settings.
- More gaming advice.
- News, coming attractions, product descriptions and more.
- Cover by Michael Wilson.
- 96 pages – \$13.95 retail – Cat. No. 173. Winter issue.



Robotech® RPG Tactics™

Love Robotech®? Then you need to take a look at **Robotech® RPG Tactics™**.

Robotech® RPG Tactics™ is a fast-paced, tabletop combat game that captures the action and adventure of the **Robotech®** anime. Two or more players can engage in small squad skirmishes or scale up to massive battles. Relive the clashes of the First Robotech War, engage in stand-alone tactical games, or use the

dynamic game pieces to enhance your Robotech® RPG experience. Or simply collect your favorite mecha from an expanding range of top-notch game pieces.

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

Robotech® RPG Tactics™ “Starter” Set – Cat. No. 55100

- **Size of Box:** Just over 11.5 inches by 11.5 inches by 6 inches tall.
- **112 page, full color, softcover rule book.** Includes a comprehensive 15 page color guide (more than 100 images) for all Macross mecha in the series.
- **24 Battle Dice, 12 UEDF and 12 Zentraedi.**
- **53 color game cards (unit cards, etc.).**
- **4x VF-1A Valkyries** (in Fighter, Guardian, and Battloid modes).
- **1x VF-1J “Officer”** in all three modes.
- **4x Destroids: 2 Tomahawks and 2 Defenders.**
- **12x Regult Zentraedi Battlepods.**
- **1x Glaug Officer’s Battlepod.**
- **1x Quel-Regult Recon Battlepod.**
- **1x Quel-Gulnau Recovery Pod.**
- **1/285th (6 mm) scale, high quality, multi-pose plastic game pieces** (40mm to 70mm tall). World-class sculpts from sculptors around the world.
- **Game rules use D6.**
- **Turn-based system of play.**
- **Scalable from small squad skirmishes to mass battles.** Can accommodate two to several players.
- **Combat is fast and designed to emulate the anime action.**
- **Assembly required.** Game pieces come unpainted. Not a toy. Small parts, not suitable for children under the age of 13.
- Brought to you by **Palladium Books®**, created with **Ninja Division** (the creative minds behind *Soda Pop Miniatures* and *Cipher Studios*).
- **\$99.95 retail price – Cat. No. 55100 (Main Box Game) – Now available!**



Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Expansion Packs and other accessories

- **UEDF Valkyrie Wing – Cat. No. 55201 – \$36.95 retail.**
- **UEDF Tomahawk/Defender Destroids – Cat. No. 55202 – \$32.95 retail.**
- **UEDF Spartan/Phalanx Destroids – Cat. No. 55203 – \$32.95 retail.**
- **Zentraedi Regult Battlepods – Cat. No. 55401 – \$36.95 retail.**
- **Zentraedi Artillery Battlepods – Cat. No. 55402 – \$36.95 retail.**
- **Zentraedi Glaug Command – Cat. No. 55403 – \$36.95 retail.**
- **UEDF Dice Pack – Cat. No. 55101 – \$12.00 retail.** 12 white, six-sided dice with red printing and the UEDF logo in place of the six.

- **Zentraedi Dice Pack – Cat. No. 55102 – \$12.00 retail.** 12 purple, six-sided dice with yellow printing and the Zentraedi logo in place of the six.
- **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Rulebook – Cat. No. 55105 – \$20.00 retail.** Note: This is the same rulebook that is included in the main game box, and is offered separately for those who want an extra copy, or want to check out the rules before buying the whole game.
- **Robotech RPG Tactics Template & Token Pack – Cat. No. 55106 – \$15.00 retail.** 10 UEDF Command Point tokens, 10 Zentraedi Command Point tokens, and one blast template.
- **Robotech® Dice Bag – Cat. No. 2565 – \$8.00 retail.** The classic Robotech® logo in a golden yellow color, silk-screen imprint. Black faux velvet, draw-string bag. 7½ x 8 inch bag with flat, round bottom. Can hold a lot of dice. **Available now, only from Palladium Books.**

2015 Christmas Surprise Package

Available now till January 15, 2016

Every year for the last 16 or 17 years now, Palladium offers a **Christmas Surprise Package** – our way of saying “thank you” to our fans and helping to make your Christmas a little more special.

What is a Palladium Christmas Surprise Package?

- **\$88-\$95+ worth of Palladium products for only \$42 (plus shipping and handling)!** That can nab you four or more items when one core rule book can cost you more than 42 bucks. What a deal!
- **Autographs** from Kevin Siembieda, available staff and freelance artists and writers. If you “request” autographs we’ll sign *every* book in your box! For many, especially those across the country and overseas, this is the *only* way to get autographs from Kevin Siembieda and crew. *Take advantage of it.*
If you do NOT want autographs, please state – “No autographs.”
If you do NOT want T-shirts, please write – “No T-shirts.”
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Infinite Possibilities

Exploring the Megaverse®

By Kevin Siembieda

The concept of an infinite Megaverse, and rules that allowed you to travel through it, came into being when people told me, “that’s not possible.”

I know it may seem crazy today, but back in the late 1970s and 1980s, a lot of people believed you could not mix magic and technology, let alone entire genres, in the same setting and make them work. Role-playing game companies were doing completely unique, individual sets of rules for every setting and genre. Heck, in the early days there were only two genres: Fantasy (*Dungeons and Dragons*, *RuneQuest* and soon afterward, *Chivalry and Sorcery*) and science fiction (*Traveller*). Even games made by the same company would have completely different rules for each genre published by their company.

I remember many a heated debate about magic vs technology and how you could not have both in the same world setting. That really bugged me and got my mind working overtime. The thing I adored about role-playing games was that you were truly limited only by what you could imagine. I believed if you made the world, and the characters in it, feel plausible and fun, you could have a blended world with magic and technology, or any combination of genres. Melding fantasy and science fiction became an obsession.

A big event at the **Detroit Gaming Center (DGC)** was our annual Octoberfest gaming extravaganza where all kinds of experiments in gaming took place. That’s where I ran a controversial tournament simply called *Magic vs Technology*. The idea was simple, and one posited by Arthur C. Clarke, that at a high enough level, technology became magic. To me, that meant if the tech-level and the magic matched each other in power, they could both function in the same setting and be roughly “equal” and “compatible” with each other.

It worked. The tournament was a success and people at the DGC started to come around to the idea. I played with the concept more and more. First, introducing bits and pieces of tech and sci-fi, such as a Thunder Stick (a revolver) and a Lightsaber (actually inscribed, “To Luke. Love Obi Wan.”). My “dungeon” (I started out playing *D&D* like most people back then) had electric lights, electric-eyes that opened some doors and turned on the lights in the hall, push buttons, fountains, elevators, and a hot pretzel kiosk franchise, all in a fantasy world setting full of magic, dragons, Orcs and monsters!

It wasn’t long before I included an entire dungeon level that became known as Tech Level Five (actually a portal to a high-tech world). This introduced characters with full environmental body armor (EBA) and laser and particle beam rifles! It all just needed to be balanced. With limited access to Energy Clips, those with energy weapons had to use them with discretion the same way one had to decide when to pull out and use the Cyclops Lightning Bolt javelin or a magic potion. It worked out amazingly well.

The next thing I knew, the guys were running into a wizard from another dimension. A madman who figured out a way to meld what he called, “the twin sciences of magic and technol-

ogy.” You just had to be careful in your interactions with this guy. As two players found out the hard way, if you let him work his craft upon a living subject, the results were usually spectacular, but not quite as promised, and always resulted in tremendous physical transformation. The mad doctor saw them as improvements, but the recipients often saw them as disfigurement. That’s how Julius Rosenstein’s classic wizard became what Jules called a “Cybernaut” still capable of casting spells, but more cyborg than human. Someone who really stood out in a fantasy setting. A wonderful player, Julius would use his character’s robotic appearance for shock value, intimidation and dramatic effect. It was awesome.

It is ironic, but I didn’t realize I had, in effect, created Techno-Wizardry way back in 1980 until one of my players, *Thom Bartold*, pointed it out to me. In fact, all the elements of my **Palladium of Desires** campaign would find their way into **Rifts®** on a subconscious level. That “fantasy” campaign had portals to many other worlds and dimensions, the direct involvement of gods and dark supernatural beings, vampires, high technology, magic and technology blended together, psionics, magic weapons, tech weapons, robots, aliens, Martians, and even cameo appearances by Tom Baker’s Doctor from Doctor Who, and Darth Vader, among other fictional characters. The group also visited other worlds. One was a parallel dimension with Samurai Trolls, Wolfen Ninjas, and human peasants very much inspired by feudal Japan, but they visited other realms including Hades, and there were several clashes between gods, and, well, all kinds of great stuff.

Those four years at the DGC held some of the best gaming experiences of my life. In part, because role-playing was new, exciting, and many of the movers and shakers at the Detroit Gaming Center (myself, Erick Wujcik, Rene Vega, Matthew Balent, Johnny Hill, Peter Rogan, Randy McCall, and many, many others) enjoyed experimentation, trying new things, pushing the envelope and creating our own games and unique takes on existing games. We were mostly college kids burning with the exuberance and fire of youth. We were unstoppable. Amazing times I will cherish always.

During this immersive period, I lived, breathed and dreamed role-playing. I would spend 20-40 hours a week on prep for my Saturday night game. Of course, this was a game with 26 or more players and ran for 8-12 hours per session! Like I said, we were exuberant college kids.

For me, personally, role-playing games gave my imagination wings in ways nothing else ever quite did.

I had always been an imaginative kid. I loved to draw and read. Loved movies, theater and comic books. The last one in particular because comics blended writing and art into a different kind of storytelling. But role-playing games – wow, they were something else entirely.

I loved the free form, the improvisation, riffing off your players and building on the words and actions of their characters and

the comments and visceral reactions of the players themselves. My guys quickly learned not to make suggestions or express concerns out loud, because if someone said, "I hope we don't run into so and so again," they would, indeed, encounter him. "Oh man, did you see that movie?" And several players would shout, "No! Don't talk about it." "What? I hated those vampires, that's all." And they'd hang their heads and groan because they knew they were likely to be facing the undead soon. It got to a point that my players were afraid to mention anything out loud. Of course, I wasn't always so straightforward. While they were expecting vampires I might give them a mummy or zombies, or a Necromancer, or a Witch with the power to animate the dead. I'd try to do things to surprise them and put a twist on what they were anticipating.

And that's why I designed rules to function as *one game system* with the idea of traveling to endless worlds and enjoying a *Megaverse® of adventure*. I wanted role-players to be able to run with any idea that came along, provided it made sense and fit what was going on.

Why not have a guy with a rifle or particle beam rifle and high-tech body armor in a fantasy game? Why not have a wizard or a dragon in a science fiction setting? Especially when you thought through the consequences for such a character and the logical progression of events if he revealed too much about himself. A dragon flying among the skyscrapers of Manhattan or in an alien world of cyborgs is going to attract a lot of attention. There will be consequences for that character and the characters obviously associated with him. On the other hand, a dragon disguised – metamorphosed – into the form of human or dog, or anything non-threatening, could hide in plain sight. That's where the players' choices make a difference and change the story. The flamboyant dragon is likely to get himself captured or killed, while a sneaky, disguised dragon is able to walk among the denizens of that setting without anyone (or most anyone) being the wiser. Either choice – and they are just two possibilities of many – carries the story and action in different directions.

I love that, so when I first conceived the Palladium game system, I designed it with flexibility and endless possibilities in mind. I knew from the very start, with **The Mechanoid Invasion®**, that magic, psionics, super abilities and the supernatural would all be part of the Megaversal experience.

Sure, maybe half the people would play within the confines of each particular world setting and not depart from it. That's fine. It's what I often do, myself. However, when I want to cross elements from one setting into another, or travel from one world to another, the rules let you do so with little or no time wasted on conversions. And when conversions are required, they should be fast and intuitive.

There are a lot of different approaches to doing this, and if they work for you, then they are just fine. Here's how I do it.

I like to make the world where the adventure is about to take place the **primary reality**. That means whatever tech, magic, powers or bad guys I'm bringing into that world from other game settings, **MUST** fit and make sense in that reality. Bringing an M.D.C. robot with Mega-Damage weapons into a world of Hit Points and S.D.C. without modification would turn that M.D.C. character into a superman, and is likely to unbalance game play something terrible, so I turn M.D.C. into S.D.C., often point for point.

A weapon that does 4D6 M.D. does 4D6 Hit Points/S.D.C.

Armor that had 300 M.D.C. has 300 S.D.C. and probably a superior A.R. (Armor Rating), like an A.R. of 16, 17 or 18. If the armor is supposed to be super-advanced and super tough, I may increase it by 50-100%, so armor with 300 M.D.C. becomes 450 or 600 S.D.C., again, with a high A.R. Superior, but it fits the S.D.C. environment.

The same applies to magic, psionics and superhuman powers, but I use my discretion, weighing what's important to the game, the players and the experiences I'm looking to provide.

S.D.C. weapons and armor are a different story. Most Mega-Damage environments also have S.D.C., so unless the weapon is magical or an experimental super-weapon or super-advanced, it still inflicts S.D.C. damage, not M.D. As noted, I might let a magical or super-advanced weapon do M.D. because of the nature of the weapon. In the case of magic, Rifts Earth is a magic rich environment where S.D.C. spells and magic items are boosted in power and do Mega-Damage.

I'm rather analytical and I like my games to make sense, so I always try to make things feel plausible and follow a particular line of logic. So I have a reason how this crossover is possible. Magic is easy, characters or monsters from a fantasy setting arrive to a modern or science fiction setting via magic or a magical dimension-spanning phenomenon. Just because magic isn't a reality in some other world settings doesn't mean it doesn't exist. It simply means the people and technology of that world went a different direction and magic is unknown to them. Unknown and not practiced. Probably not even believed to be real. But that does not mean a mage from another world or dimension/reality is unable to cast magic. We've established that ley lines and nexus points exist everywhere. Those energies may be very weak and therefore another reason magic is unknown in this reality, but the "alien" from another reality can still work his own, personal magic by drawing on his or her P.P.E. reserve. That said, unless there are places in that primary reality where miracles happen or rumored to have magical properties, the visiting mage is probably limited to only his own P.P.E. reserve and knowledge of magic. There may be few or absolutely no lines of mystic energy for him to draw upon on an alien world, dimension or alternate reality. That could also result in the wizard getting himself trapped on this new world for the rest of his life. Thankfully, the principles of magic and myths and legends about places of magic and miracles, even of ley lines (Dragon Lines in China), are common to most inhabited worlds.

A science fiction approach can include wormholes, experiments in teleportation, time travel or dimensional travel that has gone awry, or worked all too well. Where the supernatural or fantasy gods are involved, magic or a supernatural force is responsible for the crossover from one world to another. On the other hand, it could be something as simple as an alien spaceship arrives, probably in secret, to deliver the character(s) from another game world or dimension. All of this is especially easy and plausible in a setting with magic, super-science, superheroes or science fiction in the first place.

Settings like **Beyond the Supernatural**, **Dead Reign®**, and **Recon®** are a bit trickier, but can still work. In any of those, you can find a way to make a supernatural monster/demon/spirit, or mage/cult, or alien or mutant or super-science, make sense. Think *Predator* or *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, or *Hancock*, or *Chronicle*, and any number of horror movies and stories.

Game Masters, just make sure you think the whole premise through. Also think about the possible consequences which could lead to any number of fun subplots and adventures. For example, human beings don't like and don't trust other people – let alone nonhuman looking aliens, mutants, monsters or wizards – and for that matter, *anyone* who seems to possess mysterious or dangerous powers. Mysterious equates to “dangerous” for most people, especially those in positions of authority. Humans don't like the unknown. As a result, unusual people are probably seen as a threat and likely to be captured, interrogated, caged, and studied for the rest of their imprisoned lives. The less fortunate may be slain and dissected (think *Planet of the Apes*). Anyone, even humans, associated with the alien, mutant, monster or sorcerer are regarded with suspicion and fear, and may share a similar fate. Are they one of them? Are they corrupted or brainwashed by this strange being? Are they part of a cult or are there more aliens or mages that these people know about and protect?

Think things through, make them plausible and have fun.

Oh, and don't get hung up on rules. If a spell, power, skill or even a monster or O.C.C. in one game world is different from another with the same or similar name and function, pick one and get to role-playing. Seriously. Use the rule the Game Master prefers, or the one the G.M. and player group agree upon, or the one that originates from the *primary reality*, or which seems to best fit the laws of physics and/or culture of the *primary reality* (the setting in which the adventure takes place). **This last option is my preferred choice.** It makes a lot of sense to me, because it is the environment where the action is happening, and it is a fast and simple resolution to the issue.

In the alternative, you could select the most powerful or the least powerful version. You could also make the character(s) being transplanted use the skill from the world/setting from which he or she originates. I DON'T LIKE THESE ALTERNATIVES because I find them too much work for the Game Master to have to remember, keep track of, and cross-reference. **Keep it simple.** The *primary reality* overrules all others, and any *new* skills, powers, magic, monsters, beings and technology must be modified (a simple process) to conform to *that reality*. Simple and effective.

Game Master's Note: Make sure any kind of crossing over of items, abilities and characters/creatures makes sense for YOU. Make sure it is something you want, agree with and/or will have fun with. If something crossing over is too powerful, imbalances the game, is a problem for you, or is just annoying, DO NOT allow it. It may not work in this reality. Or it works very, very differently when it conforms to the *primary reality*. G.M.s, you should NEVER feel like you need to accommodate everything the players want. Likewise, if you allow something that is too powerful, especially a technological device, weapon, magic item or creature, get rid of it. Be fair about it, but it breaks, gets stolen, confiscated by the authorities, etc.

Player's Note: The Game Master should ALWAYS have final say on what he allows in a campaign. The G.M. is, in effect, the producer and director (and probably co-writer) of the adventure or campaign. The elements need to make sense to him and feel comfortable, even enjoyable. If the G.M. says, “Sorry, no, I'm not allowing that,” please accept that. Don't drill him on why not, or what if; just accept the decision and move on. I say this because the G.M. many not feel comfortable discussing his personal limitations, style of gaming, etc. That said, Game Masters, I find it best when you can put your decision in a context. However, the

Game Master's decision, especially on elements brought in from other games, should be final. Get over it and have some fun.

This is a role-playing game. It is all about character and story. Try playing something different. Don't reject a character with flaws. Sometimes those flaws help you find a unique and enjoyable voice for your character. It can make him humorous, dramatic, more cunning and a delight to play. The strongest, smartest, bestest character is not always the most fun to play.

Over time, I didn't even stop at having characters and powers that can be brought into other game settings. When I created **Rifts®**, it was a blend of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and the supernatural all mashed into a post-apocalyptic setting. Finally, here was a setting where your imagination could literally take you anywhere and you could play anything, even a baby dragon.

As a Game Master, I love the fact that I can take any character, monster or gizmo and bring it to Rifts Earth via the Rifts. Anything, from anywhere, can be brought into Rifts. Palladium Fantasy monsters, Beyond the Supernatural demons and creatures, superhumans from Heroes Unlimited, they can all be brought into the game as isolated incidents and random visitors. They can be there by accident or on purpose. Monsters and demons are something that can be so easily transplanted from one game to the other. If you really want to mix it up, change the creature's name and alter its powers a bit, but use the zillions of ideas the many Palladium games and sourcebooks have to offer. That goes for specific villains and heroes too. Take the ideas, retool them, make them yours and put them anywhere. Let your imagination cut loose and have fun.

There is a lot more to talk about regarding storytelling and improvisation for role-playing. The article about improvisation by *Glen Evans*, elsewhere in this issue, with additional comments by me, only scratches the surface, but it is very good stuff. I want to open up discussions about the art of role-playing in future articles in **The Rifter®** and maybe even podcasts or video. There is so much to talk about when it comes to the mastery and joy of the role-playing experience.





Some thoughts on Megaversal Adventures

If you can conceive of it, you can put it together

By Julius Rosenstein

I have been playing Palladium games ... well, since Palladium Books began. Technically, since *before* Palladium began, because I was part of the **Detroit Gaming Center** and play-tested pretty much every RPG and world setting Kevin (and Erick Wujcik) ever created. Talk about fun. Who could imagine where all of this would carry us over the years.

I like that Palladium Books publishes a number of different game settings in several different genres that use the same fundamental set of rules.

In addition to what will always be the flagship game for me, **The Palladium Fantasy RPG®**, and the most popular game, **Rifts®** (post-apocalyptic science fiction/fantasy/multi-genre), there are nearly a dozen other games that accommodate various genres and unique settings, stories and characters. The fact that they all utilize one basic set of rules makes mashing elements from one setting into another easy. I do it all the time.

It is fun when you can bring in characters, powers, skills and monsters from one setting into the another, quite fast and easily. Doing so enables a Game Master to keep any game campaign fresh by introducing elements – be they weapons, magical artifacts, monsters or player characters – from a setting the players may not be expecting.

More than that, I have run some pretty out-there games that include characters from multiple and diverse settings and genres – outlandish characters at that – and it works beautifully. There are some conversions and modifications to make, but nothing that takes a lot of work or time, and the results are well worth the effort. Just be careful not to imbalance your game by getting too wild.

For role-playing in a contemporary setting, **Heroes Unlimited™** covers the *superhuman* and *inhuman abilities*. **Ninjas and Superspies™**, the espionage and martial arts genre. And there are two games dealing with differing aspects of contemporary urban horror and conspiracy: **Beyond the Supernatural™** and **Nightbane®**.

In the genre of science-fiction, besides the **Rifts®** game, **After the Bomb®** and **Dead Reign®** deal with two very different types of post-apocalyptic environments (as did the now discontinued **Systems Failure™**). While **Splicers®**, the **Mechanoid Invasion®**, and the licensed product, **Robotech®**, provide other realms of adventure in hard science fiction.

And I have combined characters and elements of many of them in a growing number of gaming events over the years.

Not only do the *Megaversal rules* provide gamers with the potential for a wide variety of gaming experiences, but because the various game settings are designed to be compatible with each other, gamers can combine elements from any number of Palladium settings. This means characters from one world can

be brought into many others. This can be player characters to NPC (Non-Player Character) villains, gods and monsters! Likewise, super abilities, psionics, magic, weapons and technology from one setting can be ported into another with little or no conversions necessary. This makes the overall gaming experience something that we call the **Megaverse®**. Be they alien worlds, other dimensions, other times, you can plausibly bring elements from any of our game settings into another. This makes character crossovers, dimension and world hopping, and all sorts of crossovers possible. There are all kinds of fun combinations of characters and ideas available to all settings! Moreover, it means when you learn any one of our games, you know the basic rules and mechanics of all of them.

(Note: The **Mechanoid Invasion** was the first game released by Palladium Books. As such, it is a slightly less compatible to the rules of the later games, but can still be brought in line with the other systems with a little bit more effort. Only **RECON** is a different game system entirely.)

Fortunately, Palladium has created a Megaverse® that is large enough to house this myriad of potential adventures and campaigns, character combinations and crossovers. Although many gamers may prefer to keep their gaming within the confines of a specific world, it can be a thrill-ride and rewarding to experiment with going beyond the bounds of any one world. It is also fun that you can, in effect, use any of the RPG settings, as an alien world, or parallel dimension, or completely different dimension. Places where characters from one world can travel to others via space-ships, dimensional Rifts or magic.

My First Megaversal Excursion

Years ago, on a television show about a girl who was chosen to battle (i.e. slay) vampires and other creatures of the night, they had an episode where people were renting and/or buying costumes at a Halloween shop that had recently opened. Unknown to the customers, the shop owner was an evil magician who had enchanted the costumes so the wearer would, in fact, become whatever they were wearing. Since a number of these costumes were those of vampires and demons, this caused a great deal of chaos until the heroes were able to set things right.

However, ten years earlier, I (Julius) had independently come up with the same idea after attending a Halloween party with some of my friends. The costumes worn to the party included a Ghostbuster, an alien ambassador (taken from a superhero RPG campaign), a she-demon, a barbarian warrior, a punk rocker, and a magician (from a fantasy RPG campaign). With the Palladium game system, all of these diverse characters can be created. Anything is possible. You really are limited only by your imagination.

The following year, right before Halloween, I surprised my gaming group with a special adventure. Instead of running my usual **Palladium Fantasy**® campaign, I ran a one-shot adventure with characters from across the Megaverse. Since it was a surprise, I had written *pre-generated characters* for my players, each based on the Halloween costumes they wore from the previous year. Conversations with the players about their costumes and characters helped further narrow down and flesh out the final details about these characters.

The group ended up consisting of the *Ghostbuster* with the equipment seen in the movie, the *punk rocker* with a boom box and a shotgun, the *alien ambassador* whose high-tech devices gave him superhuman speed, the *fantasy barbarian* not used to the modern world at all, the she-demon who was a *Succubus*, and the magician who turned out to be a *Palladium Fantasy Diabolist*.

Even though each played very divergent and disparate characters which should not have even have existed in the same reality, much less team-up together, when faced with a common adversary, the players (and characters) rallied together to defeat their foe.

Although the players were initially taken off-guard by the concept, the players enjoyed the game so much that they asked that this type of game happen on a more regular basis. In fact, some of the players actually had next year's game in mind when they created their costumes for the following Halloween party. Funny.

The costumes at the next Halloween party included an *alien superhero*, a *barbarian warrior* (but a different barbarian than the previous year, played by a different person), the *Ghost of Halloween Past* (a metaphysically special ghost), a *pirate queen*, and a *Jedi knight*.

After making several character adjustments — both for fleshing out the characters and for making them game-friendly, such as making the alien a Mega-Hero from HU2, the Jedi into a Cosmo-Knight, and giving the Ghost some unusual, non-standard powers — a disparate group of adventurers once again teamed up to battle a common foe.

This unusual combination of characters again proved triumphant and the players again enjoyed the game and wanted to continue this as an annual tradition. So, a few weeks later, the Annual Halloween Bash was host to a group of people costumed as: a Catholic priest, a pirate, a hooded executioner, a modern-day commando, a female vampire, and Jesus Christ. Yeah, I know what you're thinking, but it proved to be fun. Once again, a motley crew of widely diverse characters whom easily could have (and possibly should have) been at each other's throats, instead became comrades and friends in dealing with a threat to them all.

Around this time, the Halloween parties stopped when the host moved. However, there were still the occasional party with the accompanying role-playing adventure afterward, such as the time when a caveman, a samurai warrior, and a teen-age werewolf joined with Count Dracula and the African explorer, Captain Spaulding (a noted character from a Groucho Marx movie), on a quest. Overall, though, adventures consisting of characters being based on Halloween costumes became more of a special occasion.

Originally, when I first began to run these special **Megaversal games**, it would be right before Halloween. Over time, I would run similar games as specials when it seemed like my players could use a break from their regular, ongoing campaign. I have

also run them at special events, like the Palladium Open House, and have created others, like the *Walker* series.

As I began to run these fun and outlandish games more often, I started to get even more expansive. Due to the diversity of the characters, it was necessary to modify them from different game systems and then try to fit them into the system that the particular game would be run in. Over time, as the players (and the Game Master) gained more confidence with experience, both the characters and the adventures became more open-ended.

I found it best to have any character and powers conversions conform to the “host” world. Meaning the setting where the adventure would take place. For instance, the first adventure had characters from three different Palladium RPGs: **Palladium Fantasy**® (the Diabolist), **Heroes Unlimited**™ (the alien), and **Beyond the Supernatural**™ (the Ghostbuster, the Succubus, and the punk rocker, with the latter being an Ordinary Person). Fortunately, since the adventure itself was essentially **Beyond the Supernatural**™, most of the group fit right in without requiring any tweaking.

On the other hand, the second adventure was set in the **Heroes Unlimited**™ world and therefore used HU2 rules. Only one of the characters (the alien superhero) was a true **Heroes Unlimited**™ character. The other characters were either created from **Beyond the Supernatural**™ (the ghost), **Palladium Fantasy**® (the pirate queen and the barbarian), or (modified) **Rifts**® (the Cosmo-Knight), so a certain amount of adjusting to the HU2 setting was required for them.

As mentioned above, in these initial crossover games, the characters were each created from a specific Palladium game setting and then modified to fit the “host world” setting where the adventure would take place. Though each was created using the same basic game rules, each game setting has different considerations and, sometimes, somewhat different or variant rules and game mechanics governing them.

The first Megaversal adventure I ran was set in the **Beyond the Supernatural**™ world, which meant all powers and abilities had to conform to that ONE specific setting. I think of it as the world with the dominant “laws of physics” by which all others must abide by. Which means, for example, any characters with Mega-Damage Capacity had to be converted to S.D.C./Hit Points (we usually use a simple one to one conversion, so if the character had 83 M.D.C., he now has 83 S.D.C./Hit Points; if a weapon or spell did 3D6 M.D. it now did 3D6 S.D.C., and so on). Likewise, if a spell, psionic power, super ability, skill or combat rule was different from one setting to the next, I used the “physics” (i.e., the rules) from the world where the adventure was taking place, NOT the rules of the world from which the character originated. It keeps things simple and makes sense. If the same power or rule only existed in one of those settings, I would modify it, as necessary, to fit the world where the adventure was taking place. Often no modification was necessary at all.

First, some of the characters became hybridized. Thus, characters were created by using more than one system. Some of the more common hybrids were: **Heroes Unlimited/Ninjas & Superspies**, **Dead Reign/Rifts**, **Heroes Unlimited/Rifts**, **Palladium/Beyond the Supernatural**, and **Beyond the Supernatural/Nightbane**. Eventually, a few characters were combinations of three (or more) different systems. One character in particular was a hybrid of **Heroes Unlimited/Ninjas & Superspies/Beyond the Supernatural/Rifts**, but remember, we were pushing the enve-

lope and doing some pretty outlandish stuff. Moreover, some of this was a bit of G.M. charity since for these Halloween games, I set up a standing rule for myself that if there was any discrepancy between the hybrid's different settings, the characters would get whichever rule *best favored them*. But that was my choice. Normally, it is easiest to make the abilities conform to the host world. The end.

At this point, even though some of the characters were hybrids (getting the best of both worlds, as it were), they still played under one overall given set of rules: that of the host world with the dominant laws of physics. Over time, the rules themselves were modified so that more than one set of rules was used simultaneously. For example, if some of the hybrids were **Heroes Unlimited/Ninjas & Superspies** characters (one of the more frequent combinations), the rules for both games were utilized during the game. Essentially, as the games became more free-wheeling and unpredictable, the players in turn were encouraged to let their imaginations run wild to meet these new challenges.

For the most part, the game mechanics are essentially unchanged. However, there are some modifications and tweaks necessary between one world setting to another. When Kevin designed the various world settings, he would add rules or tailor rules to fit that unique environment. That means adjusting the various characters, powers, magic, etc., that come from other settings to the one where they are all being brought into. Thankfully, this is fairly easy.

Alignment: The moral compass of the characters are the same throughout all of the Palladium RPGs. Only RECON uses a different set of rules that are very different from the rest.

Basic Attributes: The eight basic attributes (I.Q., M.E., M.A., P.S., P.P., P.E., P.B., Spd.) are the same throughout all of the games based upon the Palladium Megaversal System.

Bonuses for exceptional attributes: For most of the games, the bonuses begin at 16 (for **Splicers**®, **Chaos Earth**®, and **Nightbane**®, the starting point is 17) and, with the exception of **Ninjas and Superspies**™ (and, of course, the odd man out – the **Mechanoid Invasion**®), remain constant throughout the different systems. For **Mechanoid Invasion**®, the bonuses begin at 18 and top out at 24.

The I.Q. bonus is 1% per attribute point above 14 (with 1% higher in **Ninjas & Superspies**). In **Mechanoid Invasion**, the bonus is 1% per attribute point above 16.

The M.E. bonus to save vs psionic attack and/or insanity starts at +1 (at 16) and goes up by one (per every two points), topping out at +8 (**Ninjas & Superspies** stays at +4 for M.E. 24, increases to +5 at M.E. 25 and tops off at +7). In **Mechanoid Invasion**, the bonus is +1 (starting at an attribute of 18) and goes up by one for the next three odd numbers (19, 21, 23), topping out at +4.

The M.A. bonus to trust/intimidate remains the same up to M.A. 29 for a 96% bonus. At M.A. 30, the bonus increases to 97% (98% for **Ninjas & Superspies**). The value is the same for **Mechanoid Invasion** (which, however, tops out at 80% for a 24 M.A.).

The P.S. damage bonus (+1 per point above 15).

The P.P. bonuses to strike, parry, and dodge (+1 starting at 16 and increasing by one at every two points above that).

The P.E. bonuses to save vs poison and magic are constant throughout the different systems (the same values as the strike, parry, and dodge bonuses).

For **Mechanoid Invasion**®, the damage bonus is +1 per P.S. point over 16, the bonus to strike and dodge (but not to parry) is +2 at 18 and 19 and goes up by one from then on (topping off at +7), and there is no P.E. bonus vs poison or magic.

The two greatest changes are the P.E. bonus vs coma/death and the P.B. bonus to charm/impress.

P.E. vs coma/death: Ninjas & Superspies: Starts at +5% at P.E. 16 and increases by 1% per attribute point until it hits P.E. 30 where it tops off at +19%. **Mechanoid Invasion:** Starts at +5% at P.E. 18, goes to +10% at P.E. 19, to +13% at P.E. 20%, and increases by 4% per attribute point until it reaches P.E. 24 where it tops off at +29%. **All the other settings:** Start at +1% per attribute point above 12 until it hits P.E. 18; at P.E. 19 it increases by 2% per attribute point until it hits P.E. 30 where it tops off at +30%.

P.B. to charm/impress: Ninjas & Superspies™: Starts at 40% (at P.B. 16), increases by 5% per attribute point until it reaches 70% (at P.B. 22) then increases by 4% per attribute point until it reaches 90% (at P.B. 27) and then increases by 2% per attribute point and tops off at 96% (at P.B. 30). **Mechanoid Invasion:** starts at 35% at P.B. 18 and increases by 5% per attribute point until it reaches P.E. 24 where it tops off at 65%. **All the other settings:** Starts at either 30% (at P.B. 16) or 35% (at P.B. 17) and increases by 5% per attribute point until it reaches 80% (at P.B. 26) then increases by 3% per attribute point and tops off at 92% (at P.B. 30).

Hit Points are the same throughout all the game systems, it begins with the P.E. attribute plus a roll of 1D6 and increases by another 1D6 per each level of experience.

S.D.C., for most of the game systems, S.D.C. is determined primarily by the character's O.C.C./R.C.C./P.C.C. and/or M.O.S. However, some of the game systems have a *base S.D.C.* before any physical skills kick in. For example, **Palladium Fantasy** – 3D6 (men at arms), 1D6 (others); **Nightbane**® – 3D6 (1D4x10 for military/police/athletic background), **Dead Reign**® and **Beyond the Supernatural**™ – 1D10+12, **Rifts**® – 2D6+12. **The Mechanoid Invasion**® pre-dated personal S.D.C. so (if desired) S.D.C. would have to be assigned either arbitrarily or (more logically) by extrapolating from similar things taken from the other Megaversal systems.

Personal Energies

There are four major types of energies that help power, define, or even create characters within the Palladium Megaverse. They are: 1. P.P.E. or Potential Psychic Energy (magic), 2. I.S.P. or Inner Strength Points (psionics), 3. Bio-E or Biological Energy (uncommon), and 4 Chi (rare).

1. Potential Psychic Energy (P.P.E.) is a slight misnomer in that it is actually used to power magic, instead of psionics. P.P.E. is present in all living creatures, even if only in a minuscule amount.

However, those who study and use magic can increase their P.P.E. many times over as well as being able to tap into other sources of P.P.E. Also, beings that are inherently magical or supernatural often have an ample supply of P.P.E. Furthermore, as a

somewhat natural energy source, P.P.E. manifests along ley lines and places of magic, and increase on its own during certain times of the year and planetary alignments such as summer and winter solstices, equinoxes, full moons, eclipses, etc. and at certain places.

By far the most common of the *personal energies* found in the Palladium Megaverse is P.P.E., which has many uses. Its most common function is to provide the power to utilize magic, cast spells, power magic devices, etc. This is true of ALL game settings, from **The Palladium Fantasy RPG®** and **Rifts®** to **Heroes Unlimited™** and **Beyond the Supernatural™**. (The one exception is RECON.) However, P.P.E. also powers *Nightbane Talents* (**Nightbane® RPG**), it is the source of nourishment for some monsters and supernatural creatures, including the zombies in the **Dead Reign® RPG**, and is the source of talent, skills and genius (see **Beyond the Supernatural™**).

In theory, because P.P.E. is present in all living creatures, it should be universal throughout the Megaverse; however, in game terms, P.P.E. only surfaces in environments that are conducive to the existence of magic, which are most.

2. Inner Strength Points (I.S.P.): The use of any psionic ability requires concentration and willpower, drawing upon the astral body and the inner strength of the individual. I.S.P. are a person's inner mental strength and is based upon the individual's Mental Endurance (M.E.) modified by the type of psychic they are.

In addition to Psychic Character Classes (P.C.C.s) and actual Psychic O.C.C.'s (such as *Mind Mage*, *Mind Melter*, *Burster*, *Psi-Ghost*, etc.), there are individuals who possess raw psychic ability (Minor, Major, and even Master Psychics), but without formal training to develop their innate psionic abilities, only possess a few psychic abilities. I.S.P. is not a universal energy; only beings with any kind of psychic potential have I.S.P., but it is common to most Palladium world settings and easy to introduce into those without I.S.P. or psionics.

In the *Palladium Megaverse*, I.S.P. is the second most common of the *personal energies* (behind only P.P.E.). For gaming purposes, I.S.P. is found in the Palladium game systems where psionics exist. The **After the Bomb®** (BIO-E) and **Ninjas and Superspies™** (CHI) settings don't have psychics or I.S.P., but there is no reason psionic abilities could not be applied to either setting. For Megaversal gaming, BIO-E, CHI, and P.P.E. can be substituted for I.S.P. on a 1-to-1 basis.

3. Biological Energy (BIO-E) is unique to the **After the Bomb®** and the Mutant Animals of **Heroes Unlimited™**, 2nd Edition (and the discontinued **TMNT RPG**). BIO-E is the measure used to give *mutant animals* human features and intelligence as well as natural weaponry and augmented powers – whether super, psionic, or those that are natural to the non-mutant version of that animal (teeth, claws, etc.). Every mutant animal has its own base BIO-E which can be modified by taking disadvantages, but generally no one other than *mutant animals* may possess BIO-E. When psionics are involved, BIO-E may replace I.S.P. For the purpose of Megaversal gaming, since this is a unique occurrence (for the original **After the Bomb®** only), BIO-E can generally, be taken as is without further modification.

4. Chi is the energy of life that flows through the earth and every living thing. Chi is unique to the **Ninjas and Superspies™** system and it powers Chi combat, Chi powers, and a few of the other martial art powers. Since Chi is universal, every character

has it. However, it only applies to characters in the N&S setting, and even then, only for characters who take certain specific Martial Arts that augment their Chi; a person's base Chi is their P.E. attribute number. For the purpose of Megaversal gaming, since Chi is a unique occurrence (for **Ninjas and Superspies™** only), Chi can generally be taken as is without further modification.

Of the four personal energies, only P.P.E. and I.S.P. are almost universal and likely to be found in most Palladium game settings. And if not, they are easy to introduce. As a rule, they are compatible with one another, particularly for certain races or O.C.C.s. Magic requires P.P.E.; psionics/psychic abilities require I.S.P. However, for Megaversal gaming purposes, I like to assume that *all four* of the personal energies are available in ALL settings, they just may not be “known” to the people of that world (e.g. magic may be considered the stuff of faerie tales and not real, because it is not known to the beings of that particular reality/dimension). Likewise, CHI and BIO-E may not have common applications in that particular world, but those concepts and game mechanics work in the other world just as well.

All energies can generally be substituted (if feasible) on a 1-to-1 basis. I know Kevin likes to translate Chi points into P.P.E. on a 1-to-1 basis, rather than introduce the concept of Chi. To his thinking, Chi is what the people who use it call P.P.E.; same energy, different name. Technically and mythologically, this is not entirely true, because there is positive and negative Chi, but as a game mechanic, it works fine.

Listed below is a breakdown of where the various energies are found in Palladium Role-Playing Games:

BIO-E (only) – **After the Bomb®** and **Heroes Unlimited™** (and the discontinued **TMNT® RPG**) where it is limited to mutant animals only.

CHI (only) – **Ninjas and Superspies™**

I.S.P. (only) – **Systems Failure™**

P.P.E. (only) – **Dead Reign®** and **Splicers®**, but the concept of psychic abilities could be easily introduced into both settings. Bio-E and Chi are not appropriate for this setting.

P.P.E. and I.S.P. – Both are found in most Palladium game settings

Beyond the Supernatural™

Heroes Unlimited™

Mechanoid Invasion®

Nightbane®

Palladium Fantasy RPG®

Rifts®

Rifts® Chaos Earth®

Robotech® (Very limited. Magic and Psionics play a small role in this game setting.)

None – **RECON®**

Skills

Skills are essentially handled the same throughout the various game systems. The main differences are in regard to availability and, to a lesser degree, proficiency.

Some skills are very dependent upon the ambient level of technology within the game setting. Thus, piloting a spacecraft would be common in **Mechanoid Invasion®**, **Phase World®** or **Robotech®**, but beyond the scope (or availability) of characters in games like **Nightbane®**, **Beyond the Supernatural™**, and **The**

Palladium Fantasy RPG®, simply because these environments have less developed technology. Other skills such as Blacksmith which would be readily accessible in **Palladium Fantasy RPG®** would be obsolete and probably unavailable in games with advanced tech levels. Some games have skills that are unique only to that particular game, such as Lore: Nightbane, or Ride Giant Insects from **After the Bomb®**.

In some cases, the skills are fundamentally the same and have the same name, but the application of them may be quite different. For example, many science skills – Biology, Botany, Chemistry, Physics, etc. – are available throughout several of the world settings for a number of games. However, even characters with the “same” science skill at the same proficiency may not possess the same sheer amount of knowledge. Or the skill descriptions might vary from one world to the next. For example, a **Heroes Unlimited™** or **Nightbane®** character with a 60% in Chemistry or Physics would know far less than their **Mechanoid Invasion®** counterpart because the science itself would have become more advanced.

Also, depending upon which game system they use, characters may begin with different base percentages and, in some cases, improve at different rates. For example, some skills go up 5% per experience level in some games and only 4% (or even 3%) in other game settings. Furthermore, the benefits for some of the physical skills change between the different Palladium RPGs in regard to bonuses gained to physical attributes, S.D.C., and combat modifiers.

Another thing that determines the availability of certain skills within a given world setting is when the book was actually published. In Palladium’s early days, some of the games, such as first edition **Heroes Unlimited™**, had an extremely wide selection of skills. This ultimately proved to be too unwieldy to many gamers and the skills for HU2 were streamlined with many being either combined with others, or outright discarded. Thus, some of the game settings (particularly **Ninjas & Superspies™** and **Nightbane®**) seem to have a narrow focus on available skills. Over time, as more RPGs were published, more skills were added to expand the gaming possibilities.

Also, the earliest games that were published by Palladium emphasized the players becoming exceptional characters of some kind (adventurers, superheroes, secret agents, space explorers, etc.). As time went by, other games would emerge that would not only expand the number of skills but they opened up a new scope – that of the ordinary person.

For game terms, an *ordinary person* is generally considered to be someone without special powers, and someone who is just the common man – a factory worker, farmer, accountant, college student, an so on – but under the right circumstance that “ordinary person” can be just as heroic and important as the character with special training or abilities. *It’s all about role-playing*. For the Megaverse style of play, games such as **Dead Reign®** (Survivor O.C.C.) and **Beyond the Supernatural®**, both of which also offer players a selection of O.C.C.s/P.C.C.s/R.C.C.s with special training and powers, emphasize the opportunity of allowing players who want to take on the challenge of being an *Average Joe*, to become a default set of rules. Do not underestimate the human spirit (and role-playing) of so-called Ordinary People.

How to reconcile skill variations? As noted above, when bringing player characters in from different world settings and genres from across the Megaverse®, sometimes there are varia-

tions within skills, powers, magic spells, etc., even among abilities with the same name. I have experimented with a variety of ways to reconcile conflicting skills and powers from different settings, but I think **the easiest solution** is to have them all (or mostly) conform to the world/setting where the adventure is taking place. This makes it easy on the G.M. who does not have to check the descriptions of skills and abilities from 3-8 other RPG settings, and keeps everything consistent.

Skills tied to advanced technology like piloting spaceships, robots, cybernetics or aliens, are an exception and usually kept from the world where the character originates, but may need to be modified to function in the current realm of existence. For example, the spacecraft and robotics, even engineering skills of an alien character from a world of advanced technology many levels higher than modern Earth, might have the equivalent of the Earth ability several levels higher than that same skill on Earth. In this case, the G.M. is likely to need to keep the skill from the originating world.

When Kevin designed the Palladium Megaverse rules, he always intended there to be plenty of, what he calls, *rules flexibility* and *personalization*. He has always believed G.M.s should have the freedom to modify and personalize the rules of any game. This comes from our years at the Detroit Gaming Center where we were able to see every manner of style at running role-playing games. That personal style and approach was plainly apparent even by Game Masters running the same games.

There must have been more than a dozen G.M.s running Dungeons and Dragons, including *Erick Wujcik*, *Kevin Siembieda*, *Randy McCall*, *Johnny Hill*, *Curtis Hatchel*, *myself* (Julius), and many others. Yet, each of us had our own approach and style. Erick’s games were filled with puzzles and mysteries with clues and observations that had to be uncovered and the significance of the clue/puzzle pieces put together to form the entire picture. Erick liked to keep his gamers guessing and discovering new things, and he never revealed much about the antagonists or dangers. Kevin’s style of playing was quite different. He liked to give the players a clear map of where they were going and the dangers that lay ahead. When the player group was up against some new mystery or group of villains, he would let us role-play to discover all the information we could about the antagonists. Their level of experience, rumors of special abilities and magic items, their henchmen, troop numbers, whatever we could unearth through clever role-playing was fair game. Erick marveled at this. He also declared that Kevin created the best villains he had ever seen. Both Kevin and Erick also liked sprawling, epic adventures with plenty of surprises and twists for their players. By comparison, I think I run a more straightforward game with an emphasis on adventure, heroism and fun, even silliness at times. Kevin also includes a lot of humor in his games and was once accused of not taking his own game serious enough. (“You’re not a serious gamer!”) Like Kevin, I also place a premium on the characters and fun, and have done my share of outrageous games and silly moments. We’ve also seen Game Masters whose focus is on battle and action, and rules lawyers, and those some who seem to focus on tiny details, and many other styles of gaming.

Sorry if I digressed a bit. The point is, Kevin and all of us at the DGC (Detroit Gaming Center) were in a hothouse gaming environment. A sort of boot camp and think-tank for running and creating games. It’s how Kevin, Erick and I were weaned on role-playing and helped to shape our own approach and styles of

gaming. We learned early on that most people personalize their games, cater to their players and often tweak the rules. As a result, Kevin has no problems with Game Masters customizing or modifying rules as they deemed fit, or even pulling in rules, characters and ideas from other games and entertainment mediums. I would have to say Kevin's Rule Number One is to have fun.

All that matters is if your players are having *fun*. And so should the G.M., but never at the players' expense.

Advanced Skills in a low-tech environment. Just as a cave-man cannot use a computer, a highly advanced character can not make a sword. He might understand the principles, but actually do it, no way. Not without weeks or months of trial and error, practice, and probably someone to mentor him.

Just as less advanced skills fall short of people from advanced to space-faring settings, highly advanced people might suffer significant skill penalties in a primitive, medieval/fantasy setting. Advanced scientists and engineers are used to performing their skills and building things with the use of computers, advanced optic systems, laser cutters, hydraulic tools and precision instruments. Thus, they are likely to have no idea how to get the job done, or done quickly, or done well without them. This may severely hamper their ability to build and repair, or even blend in. Keep that in mind when you bring together characters from different genres and cultures. And have fun with it.

A skill penalty for characters used to having advanced, high-tech equipment might suffer a -15% to -20% skill penalty when forced to use our own modern day, 20th and 21st Century tools and computers. That same advanced individual forced to use medieval tools and equipment is more likely to suffer a -30% to -50% skill penalty. And if stuck with Stone Age equipment and resources, that penalty is more likely to be -60% to -80%!

Think about it, how many of "you," let alone space-faring characters, know how to skin an animal, preserve the hide as a fur suitable for making clothes, or know how to sew well enough to make clothing, or make rope, much less the skills of a blacksmith and use of a forge? And having a book understanding of the ancient tools and principles of how to do something the "old way" (or ancient way, or forgotten way!) is much, much different than actually doing the work under primitive conditions. The amount of trial and error just learning the tools is a considerable challenge. In some cases, the character may be helpless without any idea of how to get the job done, just as a caveman or medieval knight has no idea how to use a computer or drive a car without being shown and someone to show him and the time to practice and learn.

Game Master Note: Do not overthink these issues when it comes to imposing modifiers (up or down) due to technology levels, education and cultural background. When there is no clear answer or easy adaptation for modifying a skill, rule, power, or whatever, *trust your gut* and *do whatever you think is makes sense*. Just be consistent, fair and have fun with it.

Megaversal Combat Skill

There are many variations of Hand to Hand Combat throughout Palladium's many RPGs. When the first games were published, one's skill at Hand to Hand Combat was very dependent upon the O.C.C.

In **The Mechanoid Invasion®**, there were only four different Hand to Hand combat tables – Esper, Light Battle Armor

(L.B.A.) Trooper, Environmental/Heavy Battle Armor (E.B.A.) Trooper, and Commando. No other characters could receive training in melee combat.

In the **Palladium Fantasy RPG®, First Edition**, there were nine different Hand to Hand Combat tables – one for each of the eight kinds of armsmen available, and one for non-armsmen.

However, in the effort to improve the games, as well as make them more compatible with each other and other game settings, combat was made more uniform and somewhat streamlined.

Currently, the bulk of combat training across the Palladium Megaverse® is one of five standard types: *Basic*, *Expert*, *Martial Arts*, *Assassin* or *Commando*; with the notable exceptions of **Ninjas & Superspies™** and its supplement **Mystic China™**, which provide a wide array of different forms of combat.

When the uniformity first began, only the Basic, Expert, Martial Arts, and Assassin Hand to Hand Combat skills were made available to characters. These would be the combat methods described in **Palladium Fantasy®**, **Heroes Unlimited™**, **Nightbane®**, **After the Bomb®**, and **Systems Failure™** (before it was discontinued). *Hand to Hand: Commando* was added later and is found in **Splicers®**, **Dead Reign®**, **Robotech®**, **Chaos Earth®**, **Beyond the Supernatural™**, and **Rifts®** (Note: Before the **TMNT®** game was discontinued, it also had Hand to Hand: Ninjutsu as a standard combat form. **RECON®** uses a completely different style of combat and has never been part of the Megaverse® game rules).

Although a few more combat forms have appeared in some supplements, such as **Rifts® Japan**, **Rifts® China™** and elsewhere, they are generally few and far between, and almost always specialized and unique to a particular O.C.C. or R.C.C., or setting, and not well known or common outside that occupation or culture. As mentioned before, there is one notable exception: **Ninjas & Superspies™** originally provided for over 40 different combat forms (including the standard five) with more forms added in **Mystic China™**.

However, the general rule through most of the Megaverse is that player characters begin with two attacks/actions per melee round and by taking Hand to Hand Combat of any kind, they get two additional attacks per round, for a total of four to start. The number of attacks increases with experience and varies with each type of combat skill, as do the bonuses provided by said hand to hand skills. **Note:** Characters without a Hand to Hand Combat skill, a rarity, only have two attacks per melee round to start.

If you find yourself with a character from a different setting, like **The Mechanoid Invasion** where they begin with a single action, and **Ninjas and Superspies™**, where the character begins with 1-4 attacks per melee round depending upon which form of combat they have chosen to follow, default to the standard above when bring them into a different world setting. Again, fast, simple and consistent. (On the other hand, if the Game Masters feels the character's unique (and otherworldly) combat skills should make the dimension visitor faster or more powerful, he can, of course, elect to let the character have the greater number of attacks.)

Though it is not common for a character to possess more than one type of Hand to Hand Combat skill, it is possible. When this happens, the guiding principle is that the character gets *the better* number of attacks and bonuses from the two skills. They do NOT get combined and added together!

Traversing the Megaverse® ...

Visiting other worlds and game settings can be fun, but are not without peril for the player characters. A big one is how do you get home from another world or dimension? Are you stuck on this new world or dimension forever? While player characters may travel from one world or dimension to another, it is much more likely that characters, villains, monsters, strange creatures, exotic animals, weapons, magic and gear gets ported over from other realms. Both are true if that world is *Rifts® Earth* or *Phase World®* and *the Three Galaxies™*, but it can happen in any setting and work just fine.

Almost any character can be an alien visitor from another world, parallel dimension, alien dimension or another time. Kevin allowed a Sasquatch from the 1880s American Old West into his Palladium Fantasy game, as well as a number of high-tech weapons, armor and gadgets with great effectiveness and fun. The same can be said of magic, demons and monsters in a tech setting – especially a superhero setting. Make sure it makes sense, have the people of the setting respond appropriately to the character (and vice versa for the player with this fish-out-of-water character), and it all works wonderfully. A Megaverse of gaming resources. And that's one of the other perils for player characters world-hopping: they may be obviously different, feared and hunted.

Bear in mind that particular animals, monsters and demons don't even necessarily have to be acknowledged as an "import" from another game setting/dimension, just tweak it to fit and introduce it into the game. Monsters for **Palladium Fantasy®** and **Beyond the Supernatural™** or any game setting can be brought into **Rifts®** with ease and without having to concoct a reason or way that it happens. All manner of things emerge from the Rifts; some coming to Rifts Earth intentionally, others by accident or against their will. **On Rifts Earth**, any of the following could be responsible for bringing otherworldly beings and artifacts into the setting: The high level of magic that causes frequent dimensional anomalies and dimensional Rifts to open, and any number of mages, demons, monsters and deities that use magic to travel back and forth to other worlds. As a result, any monster or alien can be introduced into the **Rifts®** setting as a one-of-a-kind being, a few visitors or runaway slaves, or as an invasion force.

On the other hand, any of the many creatures of **Rifts®** can be "summoned" into **Palladium Fantasy®** or **Heroes Unlimited™** or **Nightbane®** as the result of magic or some experiment in dimensional travel, or could be the indigenous species of an alien world or dimension. The same goes for weapons and even magic, psionics and super abilities, though they can be a little trickier to import without causing game imbalance for which they were not specifically intended. Again, just modify as you deem necessary, trust your gut, be careful, and eliminate Megaverse® crossovers that don't work or create a problem. That could become an adventure hook in and of itself.

Try to look at ALL of Palladium's game books as a resource for almost any setting.

A few of my adventures

For your convenience, here are some quick outlines of some of the Megaversal adventures that I have run in the past; the first three being my original "Halloween" adventures. Game Masters,

if you like, feel free to use them as starting off points for running your own Megaversal adventures. These are actual games that I have run. The characters are the stripped down versions of the characters that participated in that game. However, the descriptions of the characters and the events that unfolded during these campaigns have been stripped down and deliberately left very sparse to allow the individual G.M.s to take the idea and build and customize the adventure to their own liking. Good luck and have fun!

#1) Core Rules and Setting:

Beyond the Supernatural™ (BTS)

Characters: Super-fast alien (Heroes Unlimited™ with a super ability or technology/power armor that makes him fast), a Barbarian Warrior (Palladium Fantasy®), a Diabolist (Palladium Fantasy), Ghostbuster (BTS with some extrapolation), Punk Rocker (BTS ordinary person), and a Succubus (BTS or Fantasy).

Mission: For various reasons, the characters, independent of each other, are all supposed to meet someone at a spooky, old house. Those from other worlds find themselves transported to the BTS setting. In addition to those people finding themselves on an alien world/reality, the heroes quickly discover they share a common enemy. A coven of witches that had summoned up dark forces to plague the BTS world. Forces that have connections to the other characters' own world, and which could bring trouble to their home world if these witches are left unchecked.

It is also possible (likely?) that the witches accidentally or deliberately summoned the off-world characters for some reason. Maybe they thought they would serve them as their henchmen, maybe they are needed for some strange ritual or human sacrifice, or maybe Fate or a particular deity has put the heroes together to stop these villains.

Our motley cast of heroes must face magic, monsters and wickedness, and must stop an arcane ritual that will unleash a power of darkness upon the world, or worlds. **FYI:** The Witches could be substituted for a group of mages, a powerful sorcerer and a few minions, a demon and his human worshipers, or an incompetent practitioner of magic or scientists dabbling in dimensional forces they don't understand and who have *accidentally* unleashed a supernatural horror into the world (or worlds).

Note: The magic involved makes it so ALL the characters understand each other's languages and can communicate with each other. This is also an example of a quick, easy fix to enable otherworldly visitors to communicate and understand one another, though there will be some culture shock and potential for some funny and lighthearted moments.

#2) Core Rules and Setting:

Heroes Unlimited™ (HU2)

Characters: An Alien Mega-Hero (HU2), Barbarian Warrior (Palladium Fantasy®), Cosmo-Knight (Phase World®) but this could also be a Cyber-Knight™ (Rifts®), Ghost (BTS), Pirate Queen (Palladium Fantasy®).

Mission: The characters all, independently, find themselves opposing an alien warlord who was out to conquer the galaxy. They found their best chances for survival and victory was to team up.

#3) Core Rules and Setting: Beyond the Supernatural™ (BTS)

Characters: A modern-day army commando (BTS), a Medieval executioner (Palladium Fantasy®), a pirate (Palladium Fantasy or a modern version from BTS or HU2), a Catholic Priest (BTS with some tweaking), a female Vampire (BTS or Rifts®), and Jesus Christ. (Um, there was a lot of creativity in this character; and I mean no disrespect to Christians. Remember, these characters were based on the “costumes” worn by the gamers at the party, and one guy came as Jesus. This character could be substituted with a medium level, Principled, kind and idealistic Wizard, Mystic, Shaman or Mind Melter/Mind Mage in touch with his own humanity and with great empathy for other people, particularly the innocent and downtrodden; character can originate from Rifts® or Palladium Fantasy®.)

Mission: Children have gone missing throughout a very large city. And not just the city in BTS, but a city from their own dimension/world. The characters all stumbled across this crisis by following a lead on the children and end up in the BTS setting and city, with a common goal and a common enemy. They decide to team up to try and solve this mystery before more children go missing, and hopefully find the ones already gone missing. The bad guy is a supernatural monster/demon or his wicked henchmen or worshipers. Or the villain could be aliens abducting children for study and to be put in a zoo (or worse?), or perhaps a crazy person who found a device (magical or super-advanced tech) that enables him to travel to other worlds and gives him some other strange powers. Why the latter character is kidnapping children could be something nefarious or shockingly innocent but misguided. He may, for example, think he’s rescuing them and takes them to a better place which could be a pocket dimension of some kind, or an alien world where they are actually in danger by monsters, or savage people or whatever you may think up.

#4 Core Rules and Setting: Heroes Unlimited (HU2)

Characters: Three super beings with two Major Super Abilities or four Minor Abilities (Heroes Unlimited™ powers), a Nightbane (from Nightbane® RPG), a ninja (from Ninjas & Superspies™), a spy (from Ninjas & Superspies™), two Heroes Unlimited™/Ninjas & Superspies™ hybrids, and two Ordinary People (BTS or Dead Reign®).

Mission: The characters attend a memorial service for a close mutual friend. A man who was a mentor or benefactor to them all. Though “officially” ruled an accident by the police, the player group learns that he was brutally tortured and murdered. Next, they discover that supernatural forces beyond the capabilities of the police are involved. If justice is to be served, it will be up to the characters.

Note: When I played this game with these characters, it was in an HU2 setting, but it could have just as easily been a **Beyond the Supernatural™** setting. And with different characters, the mission could apply to any setting with plenty of mystery and intrigue to be had.

#5 Core Rules and Setting: Optional – could be Beyond the Supernatural™ (BTS), Heroes Unlimited™ or Nightbane®

Characters: Three Heroes Unlimited™ characters (any type), two Beyond the Supernatural™ characters with special abilities, one Ordinary Person (BTS or Dead Reign®), a Nightbane (from the Nightbane® RPG), and one hybrid Palladium Fantasy®/Beyond the Supernatural character.

Mission: An extremely powerful prototype invention has been stolen. In the wrong hands, this invention could prove to be disastrous to the world. Then it is learned that the thieves are an international criminal organization bent on world domination. The authorities can definitely use a helping hand before it is too late.

#6 Core Rules and Setting: Optional – could be Heroes Unlimited™, or Beyond the Supernatural™ (BTS), or even Nightbane® or Dead Reign®

Characters: Three Heroes Unlimited™ characters (any), one from Ninjas & Superspies™ (any), a combination character (a Rifts/TMNT/Heroes Unlimited hybrid), and two Ordinary People (BTS or Dead Reign®).

Mission: A plague(virus) of mysterious origin is about to be unleashed. If not prevented, an apocalypse of biblical proportions could occur. The player-characters may be the only ones able to prevent this from happening. Maybe they are preventing the Wave in Dead Reign®!

#7 Core Rules and Setting: Optional – could be Heroes Unlimited™, or Beyond the Supernatural™ (BTS), or even Nightbane® or Rifts®

Characters: Four Heroes Unlimited™ characters (any, but at least half should have super abilities), two Ninjas & Superspies™, one Nightbane, two hybrids (a Heroes Unlimited/Ninjas and Superspies hybrid), and one Rifts® character (any, and could be a D-Bee). If the setting is Rifts®, you may want to substitute and include some characters from Rifts Earth, or not.

Mission: An insane criminal genius intends to conquer the world. He has already amassed a small private army, kidnapped a number of prominent scientists, and set up a base at a remote location (if HU2 or N&S, it is on the moon). He is growing stronger and more threatening by the day. If he is not stopped soon, it may be too late.

#8 Core Rules and Setting: Optional – could be Heroes Unlimited™, or Beyond the Supernatural™ (BTS), or even Palladium Fantasy® or Rifts®

Characters: Two Heroes Unlimited™ characters (any), two Ninjas & Superspies™ (any), two Nightbane (from Nightbane® RPG), two hybrids (a Heroes Unlimited™/Palladium Fantasy® hybrid and a Ninjas & Superspies™/Beyond the Supernatural™ hybrid), and one Ordinary Person (BTS or Dead Reign®). If the setting is Rifts®, or Palladium Fantasy®, you may want to substitute and include a couple of characters from that world setting, or not.

Mission: A young boy may be the key to preventing a plague of lycanthropy. However, he is missing and there are forces at

work out to destroy him. The player characters may be his only hope of survival and stopping the plague.

Have fun with these ideas and blending the Megaverse®. I sure do. In fact, tonight I'm running a game that combines characters from **Beyond the Supernatural™** and **Nightbane®**. So far, they have fought two demons from **Rifts®** – a White Monkey demon from **Rifts® China** and an Oni Master from **Rifts® Japan**.

A campaign that ended just before this one was **Heroes Unlimited™** set during World War II, 1942 to 1945, ending with the signing of the peace treaty after the heroes recovered the second atomic bomb from *Dinosaur Island* and helped to bring the war to an end.

My campaign before that one was **Heroes Unlimited™** with some **Ninja and Superspies** characters, and elements from **Rifts®**, **Splicers®**, and **Nightbane®**. We started in an HU2

modern day setting with super beings. The player characters took a Rift to a King Arthur inspired fantasy world; an alternate Earth of the past in which King Arthur, Camelot and all that came with that setting was real. From there, they took another Rift to a hybrid **Nightbane®** and **Splicers®**-like alternate, modern day Earth where robots were used to dominate the population. On this alternate Earth, the Nazis had won World War II by allying themselves with the demonic *Nightlords* from the **Nightbane® RPG**. This game drew inspiration from the Phillip K. Dick novel, *The Man in the High Castle*. Here the player characters, many of them possessing super abilities and martial arts combat skills and mystic powers, spearheaded a rebellion against the Nazis and the robots they used to enslave and control the people of North America. A third Rift brought them back home to the HU2 setting.

Like I said, you can put anything you can imagine together with the Palladium Megaversal rules system. Don't be timid about it. You can make it all come together.



An Evening at the Improv Table

Game Master Tips by Glen Evans

A Note from Kevin Siembieda: Improvisation in role-playing games is a favorite subject of mine, so I did something unusual with this article: I've added some asides throughout it. Comments that build on the many good points and examples Glen brings up. I hope neither the reader, nor Glen, mind my additional comments.

The year 2014 marked the *30th Anniversary of Palladium Books' Heroes Unlimited™ and Palladium Fantasy Role Playing Game®*. These two game systems are not just a hobby or source of entertainment for me, they've been a launch pad for my imagination. A source of comfort during the times when my friends were away, and have served as one of the cornerstones for how I've constructed my adult life.

The year 2015 marks the *25th Anniversary* that I have been a Game Master for Palladium Books. And if you include my early teen years (13-17) when I was pretty much obsessed with *Dungeons & Dragons* (Basic and Advanced Editions, just to rub it in how old I am) we are talking 30 years spent mapping out dungeons on graph paper, rolling up Non-Player Characters (NPCs) and monsters, and coming up with fiendish traps and riddles to entertain (and annoy) my friends while sitting at a table full of soda pop, coffee, and chips. Unfortunately, so much has changed in my life I've had to compartmentalize most of my recollections, and during the data dumping I've lost a majority of my teenage memories. So forgive me during this discussion when I'm forced

to imaginatively paraphrase what people said. Nevertheless, my two and a half decades of Palladium memories are vivid and easy to recall, which may have more to do with the significance *Palladium Books®* has played in my life than *D&D*.

Oh, there have been other games systems, *Shadowrun®* (*2nd-5th editions*), *Deadlands™* (the version with playing cards and poker chips), *Brave New World™* (I highly recommend you find a copy), *D&D® 2nd edition* (the original TSR version, not the Wizards of the Coast re-release), and a slight dabbling of other ones that lasted no more than a month or so. Despite these dalliances, *Palladium Books' RPGS* remains my stomping grounds; familiar territory that I can delve into without much forethought I know them so well. Curious enough, throughout the 25 years of being involved with the Palladium game system, I have only played a character, hmmm, maybe a dozen times. In fact, I've spent more time at the **Palladium Open House** playing characters than I have back home, in LaPorte, Indiana. (A shout out to the folks back home). Ninety-nine percent of my Palladium experience has been as a Game Master, and now, as of late, as a freelance writer for the **Rifter®**, **Palladium Fantasy®**, and hopefully future Palladium game systems. So when I'm asked what tips can I offer about running games and how to create adventures, it's not hard for me to come up with several discussion points, but the most important by far has to be *improvisation*.

[An aside from Kevin Siembieda: Like Glen, I'm almost always the Game Master. Heck, I don't know if I've been a player more than a dozen or so times, myself, in the 36 years that I've been playing RPGs. Personally, I prefer being the G.M. I love playing a wide range of characters and always being involved in the story and action. When I'm a player, I often get bored and become the troublemaker whose character starts to ask too many questions or wanders off and gets the group entangled in subplots or immediate trouble. I don't try to lead the group, I just end up looking for something to do to keep the story moving and interesting. And I really get into the role-playing elements as both player and Game Master.]

Improvisation

Storytelling is the bare bones of any RPG adventure or campaign. Ah, but the act of composing, arranging and executing that story without previous preparation – utterly done at the spur of the moment – is not only essential in role-playing as a player, but more so as the Game Masters (G.M.) The more seamlessly fluid and spontaneous the G.M. is able to make an adventure, the more invested the players become, because they feel their characters can influence the scenario. That they are driving the story. And they are! I've always felt the role-playing game experience *should never be a competition between the G.M. and the players*. The decisions players make must be allowed to help guide the story without disrupting the overall enjoyment of the gaming experience. Whether or not the G.M. feels their actions change or violate the outcome of the adventure as he had imagined it might be, is irrelevant. It is the Game Master's job to be inspired by the actions of the players and to work in unison with the players to jointly spin the story of any given adventure.

[An aside from Kevin Siembieda: I agree completely. A G.M. sets the stage for adventure and maintains game balance, but I like to let my players cut loose. This is the story of their characters and the adventures they experience. As Game Master, I am the architect of those adventures, setting the stage, creating the challenges, obstacles and villains in an entertaining way, but it is the *player characters* who “live” that adventure as the stars of this tale, and they should be able to help shape it.]

Most experienced role-players are all too familiar with Game Masters who limit player involvement to just rolling dice and making fundamental game decisions (“I open the door,” “I search for traps,” or “I attack the monster with my sword.”). I'm not saying this is the incorrect way to run a game, as there are many. Far be it for me to criticize another G.M.'s style. If your players are having fun, then you are doing just fine. But I am an advocate for giving players *free will* and letting them help dictate where the story goes. Free will is not a bad thing if the G.M. is good at improvising, especially when it furthers the moving along of the story or creates a fun side adventure the players (and G.M.) should enjoy.

As Kevin Siembieda is fond of saying, imagine the scene of a group of Palladium Fantasy players sitting around the table, and the G.M. says to them, “Your characters come to the door of a supposedly deserted castle that says, ‘Enter if you dare,’ so what does the party do?”

The players quickly discuss amongst themselves for thirty seconds, and then announce to the G.M., “We're turning back to explore the forest some more.”

What is the G.M. to do?

The player's decision is not what the G.M. had expected or planned for. He expected them to open the door. Now what?

Does he break character and announce to the players that he spent weeks designing the castle and by having their characters leave it is ruining everything he had planned and prepared for?

He could allow them to explore the forest, but in a manner that quickly reroutes their focus back to the task at hand (“You head to the forest, search for an hour and find nothing, so are you going back to the castle?”).

Or does he improvise? We advocate this option. G.M.s, allow your own imagination to take this opportunity for an improvisational stroll through the world you are so familiar with, and in which just about anything can happen?

[An aside from Kevin Siembieda: Yes. Yes. YES! Time to improvise. Don't worry, if you give the players enough rope, they will tangle themselves in an adventure none of you expected. Listen carefully to what they say and do, and draw ideas from it. If one of them says, “I sure hope we don't run into any Wolfen, or the King's men,” or whatever, then that's exactly what happens. If another mentions this might be a place where you'd expect to see some good hunting, you suddenly have a magnificent 12-point buck appear. *Only now you zing them with a twist*. The stag is beloved by the Faerie Folk in the area (or it is a metamorphed Faerie Folk, or even a dragon hatchling!) and they protect it. Any arrow or attack leveled at the stag results in the weapon being deflected by a Faerie, and one or more of them now confront the player characters. This could be a scolding or an attack, or could result in a friendly engagement (though not at first). Whatever happens, an adventure begins to unfold. The Faeries may ask the group for help, or to help a friend of theirs, or warn them about the witch or monster that kidnaps children and attacks travelers, so they will want to avoid that part of the woods. Heroes hearing about a villain or monster, especially one that kidnaps children, are likely to want to investigate and put a stop it. For additional motivation, maybe mention that it is said the creature has a great treasure, or rare magic item. Of course, the talk of treasure or magic is all hearsay, and could be completely false, but it helps compel the characters to check things out. Adventure out of thin air via improvisation!]

For those over the age of 40, your first time role-playing probably involved TSR's **AD&D** (*Advance Dungeons & Dragons*®) and more than likely you played in a number of their stand-alone adventure modules. These “read the instructions adventures” were loads of fun to play, and I'm certain many players have their favorites, *Steading of the Hill Giant Chief*, *Vault of the Drow*, *Tomb of Horrors*, *Tomb of the Lizard King*, *The Secret of Bone Hill*, and the list goes on. As much fun as these adventures are, for the most part they suffer the same narrative issue of what I like to call “a plot driven story.”

The plot is what drives the story and pushes the players into predetermined outcomes. You have to find a particular key hidden in one particular room guarded by a specific monster. Without the key you cannot open the door to the secret chamber where the princess is being held captive. They are a great learning tool. Many *Dungeon Masters* (D.M.s) that emerged from the 1970s, 80s, and early 1990s followed the pattern laid out for them in these modules and constructed their *own adventures* using simi-

lar plot driven narration not only for AD&D but for other RPG systems like **Palladium Fantasy RPG®**. This is a fine way to run an adventure and present a solid, basic foundation for telling adventures. However, they tend to limit the scope of what is allowed by players and their characters. Over time, simple, straightforward adventures can lead to an irritable game table that may sour the fun of the gaming experience.

Let me provide a real life example of what I'm talking about. Please excuse the manner in which I narrate this tale as the names of those involved are forgotten as well as other significant details, but the events did transpire as I portray them and forever changed how *I chose* to run my RPGs from that moment on.

Our Dungeon Master (D.M.) was taking sadistic delight in putting us in a constructive narrative of his own creation drawn primary from his purchase of *Grimtooth's Traps* and *Grimtooth's Traps Too* (produced by *Flying Buffalo, Inc.*, 1981 and 1982). These universal G.M. sourcebooks are filled with all types of traps without game mechanics of any kind so any D.M./G.M. can introduce them into any RPG of his choosing. Nevertheless there is enough description of the traps to entail how dead your character will be upon setting the trap off.

Well, our D.M. filled the entire adventure with these traps. We didn't fight (or find) a single monster or for that matter, gain anything by having our characters go through the dungeon. Our Dungeon Master put us in this adventure merely to amuse himself. He seemed to take pleasure watching our characters get shredded to pieces by trap after trap (to any D.M. out there who decides to put the *Delvermatic Dicer and Malinger Trap* in your adventure, you're an evil bastard!). After two hours of this pointless bloodletting, our characters are strung out, tired and wanting desperately to get out of this hell hole. Our D.M. informs us that our characters are walking down a long corridor and a bit later, before us we see a bright purple door. He asks, "Okay what are you going to do?"

Ted says vehemently, "@\$%@ this, I'm not going through that door."

Don whose character had a bag of holding filled with healing potions (three quarters of them we had used up), says, "Me neither, I'm fresh out of healing spells" (he was playing a 5th level cleric with a Staff of Curing – all the charges were used up).

Pete insists that we turn back and start searching the cavern with the giant fan on the floor (*Beware of Low Ceiling* trap) for he's certain we missed a corridor (Pete was our map-keeper).

I say nothing.

So we spend the next ten minutes retracing our steps, trying not to set off any trap that we had not activated already (too late). Our Dungeon Master finally insists that we have been everywhere so he tells us, "Once again you find yourselves facing the purple door." This starts a five minute argument with Pete who insists that we missed a turn (he was right but that's beside the point).

Ted leans back in his chair and says, "Not happening, I'm not going through that door."

Our D.M. gets pouty in the face, "Are you guys giving up or what?"

Ted replies, "Unless that door is the way out of here, I'm not going through it."

Pete complains again about the map.

Don looks at me and says, "Do you want to check out the door?"

I'm playing a third level Elf Thief. At that moment my character only had three Hit Points. In fact we were so low on healing that I spend the rest of adventure (which included a second game session) stuck at 3 Hit Points. So far every time I attempted to find and/or disarm a trap, regardless if I made a successful roll or not, has either activated the trap and affected everyone else in the party but me, or I've been turned into a blood smear on the floor. I say, "I'm sitting on the floor and eating some rations."

Exasperated, Don says, "Fine I start walking toward the door."

Before our D.M. can say another word, Ted says, "I draw my bow and fire an arrow at the door."

Our D.M. replies, "You can't, you'll hit Don."

Ted eyes him skeptically, "Then I step to one side."

"You can't, he's still in the way."

Ted's face spasms with irritation, he looks toward Don and says, "I tell him to move out of the way."

"He doesn't pay attention to you." the DM insists.

"I don't?" says Don. "Why not?"

"No, your mind is made up. You're going to open the door."

Now Don looks perplexed, "But don't I get to make a saving throw?"

"You're not charmed, you're just determined to open the door."

Irritated, Ted says, "I yell at him to stop and come back, and I'm rolling to see if I can hit the door with my knife."

The D.M. says, "He's not listening to you and he's still in your way."

Don started to whine, "But why don't I get a chance to make a saving throw?"

"You don't need to make a saving throw, you just want to open the door."

"But why?"

"Because you're frustrated and you want to keep moving."

"I am?"

At this moment, I speak up and say the following, "All aboard. The plot train is departing the station, chug-a-chug-chug-a-chug-chug-a-chug-chug-a-chug, choo-choo."

Everyone falls out of their chair laughing while the D.M. looks at me with murderous intent for the rest of the day.

Needless to say, after five more minutes of meaningless arguing, we ended up going through the purple door which was actually a portal that led to the second level of the dungeon. Upon learning this piece of information, I'm thinking, "What kind of crazy mage makes a dungeon filled with this many traps and why on earth would anyone be this determined to get whatever it is they're searching for. (It turned out to be a piece of paper claiming we won the contest – yes a big waste of time for all of us).

My comment about the plot train truly fit the situation. Like being on a train, our D.M. was vehement about keeping us on course and on schedule. There was nothing we could do deviate from the plot we were on, except to quit playing. We either died or survived. Boy, was that a lot of fun. Sarcasm, intended. We used up our supplies without receiving any sort of reward. The experience points we received was not worth us nearly dying several times, we used up a Ring of Three Wishes and there were not even good memories of an exciting, fun time.

I'm certain fellow RPG players can certainly relate to such an experience. Those of us who are long-time Game Masters are well documented as having a nasty habit of "refereeing" other

people's games whether or not we are actually participating in the adventure.

There is no truly right way or wrong way to run an adventure, yet one needs to make sure everyone *enjoys* the experience. It's a balancing act that requires the Game Master not to load everyone onto a one-way train and take them on a ride to showcase his own imagination. Nor do they want to be sitting ducks continually victimized as bandits rob the train without being able to do anything about it. It's easy to get caught up in the story part of running an RPG, but you should never predetermine the final results or the actions of players. Nor should you expect them to follow the script exactly as you have imagined it. Riding the plot train is great for revealing one's narrative powers, but it does nothing for **players** who want to demonstrate their skill to role-play and to be a true, living part of that story.

Instead of plot driven narration, I suggest G.M.s make the effort to try their hand at a **character driven story**. In this way the player characters guide the direction of the story. As Game Master, you provide the plot, setting, theme, antagonists, and motivation. You could even provide pre-generated characters. Making a back story is fine, just provide essential details in order to answer questions the players might ask if a situation presents itself. But the moment the adventure starts, the characters are the ones leading the story. Instead of being the engineer of the *plot train*, you, the Game Master, are now a Driver's Education Instructor. The players are driving the car, you're the guy in the passenger seat pointing them in the direction they need to go, handing out advice, being on the lookout for other vehicles, and you have a brake pedal on the floor that allows you to stop the vehicle at your discretion. But at no point do you grab the wheel. You can try to slow the vehicle down to keep the driver from rear-ending the guy in front of them, but you can do nothing to stop them from going into the ditch. You are simply along for the ride to provide the narration of the event as it unfolds. Oh you can warn them, but in the end "they" must be the ones who make the decision to enter the room even though it smells of decay and there's a sign out front that says "Master Vampire Inside." And deal with the consequence. If it turns out the Master Vampire is an Ogre Wizard accompanied by a dozen Palladium Fantasy zombies wearing leather armor that makes them impervious to fire, well that's what happens when you fail to yield at the yellow light.

[An aside from Kevin Siembieda: The problem with analogies is that they can be tricky. I don't know if I agree with the example of a driving ed instructor. It seems to me they can stop the car and take complete control of the steering, but I get Glen's point, and I agree with it completely. This is not just the Game Master's story. All of you from G.M. to each player are creating the story together. The things the players do in the voice of their characters should have meaning, good and bad. Consequences should be an important part of your G.M. tool bag, too.]

I also encourage G.M.s to allow for numerous undetermined events to play a major role in the story. What I mean by this is that a player(s) may do something the G.M. has not anticipated. There is likely to be numerous possible outcomes and reactions. Roll with it. This is where some improvisation gets combined with dice rolling. For example, I have a personal love for *Emotion Dice*. This is a six-sided die with faces on it, typically joyous, happy, sad, worried, unimpressed, or angry, or a number of other variants. (Btw, a pack of four *Emotion Dice* is available online and from Chessex for un-

der \$10). This die is great for rolling NPC reactions for something the player does. It also allows the G.M. to come up with spur of the moment outcomes that are not prearranged.

For example, the characters are in a tavern (surprise, surprise). As Game Master, you describe the scene and the people inside. Suddenly, for no logical reason, one of the player characters says, "I turned toward Bob and punch him in the face and yell, 'I ain't paying for your meal this time around.'"

Well, as G.M. you could decide the outcome on your own or you could roll the Emotion Dice to give you multiple outcomes. Suppose the sad face comes up. You say, "Okay, after you knock Bob to the floor, the tavern owner runs up to your table, drops to his knees and starts to cry, "Please don't start a fight. I've already had to fix this place up six times in the last month because of the rowdy Dwarves who keep coming here and starting a drunken brawl."

[An aside from Kevin Siembieda: What the two player characters do next should be left up to them. If the assaulted character, Bob, is an NPC (Non-Player Character), you, as G.M., should know how he will react to any given situation. You have alignments to help you with that. But improvise and go with what feels right within the moral compass of that character's alignment. Maybe the innkeeper's plea touches Bob's heart and he takes the punch and walks away to pay the bill without further incident (for now). But that doesn't mean payback isn't coming later. Improvise. And make sure to consider consequences. Bob may seek revenge later, or pull a prank on his attacker when he least expects it, or stiff him with a bigger bar bill next time, etc. And if they fight, maybe they make an enemy of someone else at the tavern, or catch the eye of a villain who thinks he can use these two brawling dopes and their friends for his own schemes. Or maybe they all get arrested and forced to do a job to make up for what they did. If they refrain from busting up the place, maybe they've won the innkeeper's confidence. Heck, this could be the start of a friendship and the barkeep could become a regular source of information. Let your imagination loose. And let there be consequences.]

The words from the innkeeper could lead to other questions. This guy could provide all kinds of information if the players *role-play* this right. Rowdy Dwarves? Is the player group trying to find a particular Dwarf? If so, this is a clue for them. An adventure can start some the simplest and silliest of incidents.

Was it planned? No. Was this information something you, the G.M., had planned to get to the players? Maybe. And maybe this was a good – if unexpected – way to get it to them. Best of all, the players feel they initiated it on their own.

That's the true secret of being a great Game Master: Never let the players know what you fleshed out and had planned for them, or that you just decided to do a spur of the moment improve with the roll of the dice. If you know your world and NPCs well enough, you can respond to any action taken by the players regardless of the circumstance. You might even surprise yourself with the direction you take them in when you let the characters drive the story.

Here is another example I often use. I've indicated when I'm Game Mastering that I'm pretty flexible about what I allow to happen or where the players can steer the direction of the adventure. When somebody asks to do something that I've not anticipated, or there is a certain amount of randomness that I feel is ap-

propriate because of the activity, I roll **percentile dice**. A roll of **01-33%** indicates a favorable or an unfavorable outcome. A roll of **34-00%** means nothing happens and nothing changes. You could just as easily use a **D20** and choose 01-10 or 11-20. I do percentile because it gives me, as the G.M., the better odds (34-00%), yet at the same time my players feel that they're contributing to the direction of the story by making me roll dice to see if their activity can influence the situation. Should the dice roll in their favor, I must in honesty cater to the situation yet remain realistic to the context of the events as they play out.

That's the way the die bounces

Here is another point I feel strongly about. Just because we, as G.M.s, may be hidden behind a screen (books, paper cups, or whatever), our players need to feel that we are being truthful and honest about our dice rolling. If the players are kicking butt and wiping the floor with the villains despite the time you put into making them, tough. That's the way the dice roll that day. Sometimes a G.M. has to take his lumps with the best of them.

One of my proudest Palladium player moments occurred at the **2012 Palladium Open House** where several players and I vanquished one of Palladium's finest Game Masters, *Carmen Bel-laïre*. A G.M. infamous for killing players in the most enjoyable ways possible. Every player character survived while Carmen's vicious super-primates lay dead in the street. Nearly all other groups before us had their player characters die a horrible death. But we walked away victorious and all because the dice simply turned on Carmen. Nothing went in his favor. I'm certain many a G.M. has been humbled in a similar manner, and forced to endure the endless ribbing from their players which can go on for years and years, and every so often, rears its ugly head in the middle of a new game session like an animated corpse, just because one of the players happens to roll a *Natural 20*.

The point is we Game Masters are obligated to endure these moments, just as the players have to accept lousy dice rolls when they make them. The dice must be allowed to roll with honesty even though it may not be the outcome we desire. If the villain can't score a hit and fails every saving throw, so be it. If one particular (and annoying) player in the group produces a *Natural 20* every six rolls of the D20, all you can do as G.M. is grit your teeth, grumble out your frustration, and hand out experience points like a man. We demand our players submit to the rule of "whatever and how the dice fall is one's unarguable fate," we must be willing to agree to such terms as Game Masters, as well.

[An aside from Kevin Siembieda: I never let dice rolls bother me. If the big bad villains are getting their butts handed to them, I look at it as **Fate**. The game gods have spoken, and it is how it is meant to be. Let the players enjoy this easy win. They'll have plenty of tough goes in the future. Just remember, *consequences*. Toward the end of a long, wonderful three and a half year campaign with my legendary game group, *the Defilers*, one of the guys asked this question of me. "If the 26 of us are such high-level bad asses (they were all 9-11th level, with one of them being a second level god), why do keep getting our butts kicked? Why are we always being targeted by the new bad guy? Shouldn't they be afraid of us? The answer was, yes. It was exactly because the bad guys did fear the Defilers, that they would decide our heroes had to be "dealt with." Being targeted by villains was a consequence of the heroes' incredible reputation. When people

were in need of heroes, they turned to the Defilers. When a villain had a big plan, he knew he would have to face the Defilers sooner or later, so the bad guys would often made a preemptive strike against them. And some thought they could make a name for themselves by defeating the Defilers. As for getting their butts handed to them, that was most definitely NOT the case. The Defiler's were a G.M.'s dream. Talk about fateful dice rolls. More often than not, on their first encounter with a new baddie, the group would play poorly and roll terrible numbers, lose the battle and have to retreat. But true heroes, they always came back in dramatic fashion. And always with a vengeance, a great plan and better dice rolls to ultimately win the war. Those adventurers were epic. I love those guys.]

Back to improvising

Improvising is not all that difficult. And like any muscle, the more you use it, the easier it becomes. You can even surprise yourself in the direction you can guide a story if you allow the players to take the lead and improv based on their actions.

Using a simple outline with just enough detail to give you a starting platform can ensure any action your players take, sparks something wonderful and memorable. Once again, allow me to draw upon the past as to present an example. This time I shall use a Palladium experience.

While I was living and going to school in Chicago, Illinois, I came up with a pretty fun adventure for my players back in LaPorte, Indiana, that I knew would be something of a challenge for them. So I made my map, rolled up my NPCs, wrote my back story, and all the other things a Game Master should have ready prior to game time.

Fifteen minutes into our game session, I go into detail describing the setting of the castle in which the bad guy was holed up in. As I recall, he was some evil wizard or priest. Now I don't know why I did it, possibly because I copied the description scene out of a book, I went into extra detail about the large forest next to the castle on one side and a large, pristine lake on the other side. These two things had nothing to do with the story except for being in the descriptive narrative at the beginning of the adventure. So after describing everything in detail, I turn to my friend Herb, and ask him what's the party going to do? Without pause, Herb says, "I'm going down to the lake to fish."

Right behind him, Randy says, "I'm going to into the woods to search around."

John says, he's going to set up camp.

Now right away I realized the guys were, (A) going to wait around and do surveillance around the castle, or (B) follow Herb's lead to see just how far he could lead them away from the direction I wanted the adventure to go in. This wasn't the first time they did this to me – nor the last. My friend Herb is the master of doing this sort of thing, and one of the reasons I had to raise the bar on my *improvisation skills*, because you never knew what Herb would do in any situation. And when I say you had to prepare for the unexpected, Herb didn't come out of left field. Oh no, Herb pull something buried out in the dugout that had been sleeping there for half a century, and tossed it in the mix.

So I had two choices, I could either say, "Okay, Herb. You catch some trout. Randy you catch some rabbits. John, you finish reading your book about such and such." This would get them

back on track and eventually lead them into the castle where, to my thinking and weeks of planning, *they are supposed to go*.

Yeah, I could do that. Not a true “plot train,” but the Driver’s Ed guy telling the student to please make a left hand turn and pull into the gas station.

Well, I didn’t.

Unbeknownst to me until that moment or improvisation, we learned there is a lake serpent living in the lake bullying the people who live in the woods. He makes them provide him a human sacrifice on a regular basis as well as many baubles and valuables. Inside the castle, the lake serpent’s evil minion was keeping all the stuff hidden and secure. So in the end, I got them to go inside the castle, it just took a little longer getting there and the motivation behind the adventure changed into something much more heroic and noble than being a simple treasure smash and grab. I certainly enjoyed the change and the guys did as well. They definitely received some nice random generated stuff out of it.

These spur of the moment game improvisations are never expected, but they can add a lot of background, emotion and drama. The kind of pathos that is not possible unless you let the players help drive the story and you improv. If you know your players so well that you can make several contingencies for their wandering, you may have all the bases covered. But why would you want to do that in the first place? I suppose if it’s hard to come up with ideas you’d do that sort of thing. Yet while you’re not putting you players on the train, you’re certainly not leaving much up to chance.

I have a special place in my heart for the *Champions® RPG* (by Hero Games back in the 1980s and early 1990s). This RPG had some of the coolest adventures ever. I mean the detail is astounding. Every little piece of information a G.M. could ever want is provided; background story, follow-ups if the players are victorious or defeated, specific sequences of events, details about what you can find in rooms, information about NPCs that don’t even relate to the story, and so on. It is information overload with most of the mental work already done for you. Great stuff, but it still tries to marshal the players into a certain direction or behavior. That’s what canned adventures do. But what if they choose to kill the bad guy instead of interrogate him? Now all that info he’s suppose to provide is lost. How do you get it to the heroes if he’s dead? Reroute them in a different direction by using a *trail of bread crumbs* that essentially says, “Do this, go here, talk to him, etc.”

I prefer improving and making the situation feel like it was part of the story the whole time. In other words, I’m never allowing my players to see my hand. They can’t tell the difference between what I’m making up at that moment, or had preplanned all along. I’m always trying to stay two steps ahead of them, not as if we’re in a giant chess match. I’m not trying to be victorious over them. No, I’m merely the author of an ever evolving story with a likely outcome whose ending is known to me but out of my hands to bring about.

Let me provide another example. I’m running a Palladium adventure with Herb and John in which I previously was a player in with my friend Miles. I’m not sure if it was out of laziness or simply because I enjoy improvising on the spot, but I never bothered reading the adventure beforehand. Even though I’m reading it pretty much out of **The Rifter #11** (The Shrine of Ventax – only I had it as a Shrine to Rurga), I’m changing things here and there as according to my memory of how my friend Miles ran me and

other friends through it months earlier, only now I’m catering it toward Herb and John’s style of Palladium role-playing.

Of course, the guys have no idea that I’m changing things even as I read them out of the book, at least not until we reach the second floor. Like I said, I never bothered reading the adventure beforehand. The guys arrive on the roof of the temple. I describe all that they can see and I go into extra detail about a wooden door before them and what appears to be a door on the left hand side of the wall, possibly indicating both doors go into the same room. So Herb says he listens at the door facing him. I tell him he hears nothing inside. He asks if the door is locked. I say no. He opens the door. I look down at the page and I suddenly realize that although the map on page 102 clearly shows rooms 59,60,61,62, and 63, the room Herb just opened the door to (room 62) is not listed on the page. There is a description about what’s in room 60 (a 2nd level human Wizard) and according to the map, that room is connected to room 62, but written on the page between Training-Hall (Room 61) and the Wizard’s Chamber (Room 63) there is nothing.

Now this was either an error on the writer’s part (a shout out to Michael Long. Personally, I love this adventure!), or somehow during the laying out of the manuscript, something got accidentally deleted. (No, Wayne.) Regardless, I start laughing to myself. And I say, “Well you open the door and see nothing, but a white void because there’s nothing written here on the page.”

I break protocol and show the page to the guys (not the adventure) just for the fact that room 62 is missing on the page. We start making jokes how it was probably a Friday when “the Dwarves” who we claim build all the fantasy RPG castles and dungeons went to work that day. John then reminds us the same thing happened to us during a 2nd edition *Shadowrun* module we played a few years ago. We laugh again as we recall John describing to us the hallway of some castle we were in and upon opening the door we found nothing because the writers and editors forgot to include anything about the room. Once again, it was shown on the map, but the contents and description inside were left off the page.

After about five minutes of breaking character, I decide to get us back on track. So I say, “Okay guys, what are you doing?”

Herb says, “I guess we search around the rooftop for another door.”

“I say, no, you can still open the door and search.”

Herb looks at John and they realize I just came up with something off the top of my head. He gives me a crafty smile and says, “I open the door.”

I describe a kitchen (the dimensions are probably off) in grand detail and how it smells like meat has been cooking in boiling water for way too long. The adventurers can hear movement in the room. As they move around inside and they see an elderly looking woman in peasant attire. Her yellowed teeth are crooked, she has a long neck, ragged gray hair, and a long, crooked nose. She bobs her head up and down while she stirs a large cauldron.

Upon seeing the player characters, she says, “Wait one moment, the stew is still cooking. Take off your boots, leave your weapons on the floor, and ya’ better have your own spoons because I ain’t handing out anymore. You damn guards are always taking things out of my kitchen.”

Herb walks cautiously toward the old woman and asks, “Who are you?”

She responds, “What kind of question is that? I’m the woman who makes sure you boys are fed properly. If ya wanna eat, then sit down and wait until the stew’s ready.”

“Do you serve the Ratlings?” John’s asks.

“Ratlings? What are you talking about? Only rats in this Temple of Rurga are those the cat finds.”

John says he wants to peer inside the cauldron. I say make a Perception Roll (we’ve been using *Perception Rolls* in PFRPG right after the rules came out for them in the **Nightbane® RPG**). He rolls a D20 and with bonuses, gets over a 17.

“You can’t tell what she’s cooking by smell alone,” I tell him, “but all of a sudden, a long leg bone floats up to the surface. It looks like all the meat on it, has been boiled off. There is no doubt in your mind (his Priest of Light had a medical background and biology skills) that it is a human leg bone.”

Herb says, “I reach out and grab the woman by the neck.”

I give my wicked smile and say, “Not before you roll initiative.”

Herb rolls well but not as good as the old woman.

“You try to reach out to grab her, but she’s faster than you expected and she grabs your wrist. You immediately feel the strength of her grip, it is way stronger than yours.”

“It’s not very nice to hurt the hired help,” she snarls. I tell Herb to make a saving throw vs magic.

Herb makes it.

“You feel some kind of energy flow into your flesh, but it does nothing to you.”

John says, “I roll my skill Lore: Undead (the skill originally appeared in **Yin-Sloth Jungles 1st edition** back in 1994 and I’ve always allowed it in 2nd edition).

John makes the skill roll. “The old woman begins to squeeze Garret’s wrist in an effort to snap it, but there is no doubt in your mind that this old woman is a *Fetch*.”

A Fetch is an undead being of my own creation (see **The Rift-er® #58**). I’ve been using them for years in my Palladium Fantasy games. They’re undead servants perpetually performing the duties they did in life for their former masters, i.e., butler, maid, cook, hired hand, nurse, etc. They look like wrinkled old people. Although they are compelled to perform their service duties as they did in life, they still have some free will of their own. If you want to hurt these guys, you do something to make it difficult to continue their work or finish a task, or you use a holy symbol or anything made out of silver (does double damage). A Fetch may look old, but they are lightning quick (Spd 36+6D6), and each time they touch the flesh of a living being, that individual must make a saving throw vs magic (14 or better) or suffer the same effects of a 5th level *Age spell*, which reduces the S.D.C. and Hit Points of its victim by 25%!

Herb and John didn’t take long to rid the world of the Fetch just as I knew they would. The important thing was they got to fight a monster that tried to catch them off guard and make themselves feel they thwarted my plans. Truth be told, I knew the Fetch wouldn’t offer much of a challenge, yet the missing room broke the flow of our game session and I was able to bring it back with an improvised monster. A fun detour that added to the action and sinisteress of the lord of the castle. They took her down and we continued on until they completed the adventure by eventually slaying *Xammael the Dread Lord*. All in all, an enjoyable time for everyone involved.

I recommend all G.M.s should be able to improv something similar. Drop in something unexpected but appropriate to spice things up or to fill a void in the action. It’s nice if the players can be just as spontaneous and imaginative, because it provide the G.M. ideas and inspiration for ways to expand upon the narration.

[An aside from Kevin Siembieda: Absolutely draw on the things the players say in character AND among themselves. It is a great source of ideas. However, you can do the same thing with any stand-alone adventure module that Glen calls “read the instructions adventures.” Take these adventures and use them as an outline for an adventure. Change the names and villains, add some twists and variations, and boom, you have a completely new adventure. Let the player characters help drive the story, and you would never know it is a pre-generated adventure. There was a guy at the Detroit Gaming Center who was regarded as an amazing Game Master. Curtis ran adventures people raved about. So I was surprised when I discovered that Curtis could not create his own adventures from scratch. It turned out that he needed someone else to provide him a starting point. Thus, he could take the absolute worst adventure module and through his own imagination and improvisation, turn it into a masterpiece. An impressive skill in its own right. And a great example of how everyone approaches role-playing games from their own point of view and style of play. As Glen noted elsewhere, there is no right or wrong way to play. If you and your players are having fun, then it is the right way for you, even if it is completely different than the way Glen or I or anyone else may G.M.]

There is nothing I love better than the one on one duel between player and G.M. Not so much the rolling of dice, but the role play vs role play. It’s the same thrill I get when watching a good movie — the dialogue that rolls off the character’s tongue, the right word or phrase is uttered, and everyone, including the G.M., shares in the experience. An experience that is so difficult to explain to the uninitiated. As in dance, having the right partner makes the performance something magnificent to watch, and provides an opportunity for everyone else in the group to give their best effort, even if they’re not comfortable with the focus of the adventure centered on them. We recognize those who take the natural leader role, and while some object to how such individuals seemingly take over an adventure and put the focus on them, what people like my friend Herb do, is grab the narration like it is a rodeo bull and allows himself and the other players to be taken on a ride.

There are few people in my role-playing experience who are able to do this. Although I must say the last time I played with my friend Andy, it was beautiful synchronism between us. The narration was something enjoyed by the rest of the players and the end result was everyone applauded when the adventure ended. Herb, however, does it on a different level. He wraps his mind around the narration and says, “I want to try this and see what happens.” You, as the G.M. have the option of striking down the idea or you can say, “Well, let’s see how the dice roll.” Strangely enough, the dice often seem to do whatever Herbs wants them to do. Thus what should be improbable starts to follow a path of logical and inevitable conclusion. All you can do as the G.M. is sit back and watch it happen.

[An aside from Kevin Siembieda: Don’t feel threatened by players like Herb, be inspired by them. Challenged to think outside the box and to improvise. I love it when players surprise me.]

[An aside from Kevin Siembieda: I had a similar situation, where the player has a 2% chance on a percentile roll, and nailed it with a one. Fate! What do you do? Improv and run with it.]

So I say to you aspiring and veteran G.M.s, let the players do whatever it is they need to do to feel like they are part of the story. Embrace them as co-creators and have fun building on their inspiration. A GM who can improvise can parry and redirect the players' moves without throwing them on a plot train. For those whose confidence is a little lacking, you don't have to hide behind your Game Master screen, fudging dice rolls, sticking to

I encourage players and G.M.s to stretch your imaginations and give it a try. You just never know what may come of it.

[An aside from Kevin Siembieda: Amen. It's all about characters and story. Unleash your imagination, be flexible and have a blast.]



Yokai of Japan

Optional Material for Beyond the Supernatural™, 2nd Edition. Adaptable to Rifts®, Heroes Unlimited™ and other settings.

By Shawn Merrow

Additional Text by Kevin Siembieda

"I have spent the last several weeks traveling around Japan looking for any signs of the supernatural. This country has a such a rich history of goblins, ghosts, spirits and creatures of magic, I was sure I would find something more solid by now. I have heard many great legends and seen many impressive shrines, and though the people seem to believe in spirits in their daily lives, I've yet to see any evidence of such things.

"I met a cheerful man at a small bar last night. He was a wealth of information about mythical and legendary creatures of Japan, particularly the Tanuki prankster. I asked if he was a scholar, but he laughed and said he was just a traveling salesman. After a pleasant evening of drink and conversation, he asked me to give him a ride in my rental car to a remote shrine. He insisted on paying me despite my protests, and I finally acquiesced to accepting a few yen. The next day I went to see how much cash I had on me and found a bunch of leaves in my wallet. Both my money and his gone. Was that nice man I gave a ride to yesterday a Tanuki? Maybe I should spend a few more weeks in Japan, after all."

- Excerpts from Victor Lazlo's Journals

Japan has a rich history when it comes to *Yokai* or monsters. According to Japanese myths and legends that persist into modern day, these magical and supernatural beings have existed long before recorded history. Perhaps even before humans came to the islands. These spirits, goblins and monsters have a large impact on the culture from inspiring artists to the many festivals involving them. And though, in these modern days most Japanese claim they consider them only legends, they still make offerings to many of these "spirits" to keep them happy and away from causing them trouble in their daily lives. Crazy? Just a cultural practice based in superstition? Perhaps. Or perhaps, the Japanese and other Asian cultures across the sea have learned how to live with the supernatural.

Even today, there are those who insist the old stories are true, the creatures are real and that *Yokai* are still around them. They have just learned how to better conceal their presence and true nature. The best places to find accurate information on *Yokai* are the ancient shrines and temples that still hold onto the old beliefs. They are also places to find help if you're being tormented by *Yokai*, goblins or spirits. All that is usually asked for is a small donation to the shrine, and compliance with anything else that is asked of you to rid oneself of supernatural forces at play.

An important question to be asked is, "What is a *Yokai*?" That is not an easy question to answer as it covers a wide range of creatures. The word is made up of the characters for "otherworldly" and "weird," and has been translated in a number of ways, ranging from "demon" to "specter." In this article I have listed some of my favorites.

Notes on Stats: As you go through the stats you will see I took a few liberties with the legends. In Japanese folklore, none of these monsters have a form of discorporation. Discorporation is part of the **Beyond the Supernatural™, 2nd Edition** rules system, so I gave each of them one that seemed logical. Also, none of my sources listed how long they lived. I hope everyone can understand where I had to put in my own speculation to fill out the stats and be understanding of it.

Funa-yurei

Funa-yurei are said to be the restless spirits of people who have drowned. With the setting of the sun they arise from their watery graves to float just below the surface of the waves. When a storm brews, they look for a boat to sink. They are most often seen as a small group of zombie-like beings in a fishing boat, but may also be encountered walking on surface of the water in small groups of 2D6 seeking boats to sink and sailors to drown. Some believe they do this so others suffer as they do, or to take their place, letting them finally rest in peace.

The appearance of these spirits can range from completely ordinary looking corpses to skeletons; both are frightening visions. The longer they have been under the water, the more decayed their bodies. The one thing that always gives them away is a white triangular headdress as used in Buddhist funerals.

As a boat or ship approaches these murderous specters, a faint light is seen in the distance. Next a steady drumbeat of a funeral can be heard over the wind and waves. Then, a small fishing skiff contain 2D6 Funa-yurei pulls alongside the vessel and the corpses climb up onto the boat to sink the boat and drown all on-board. Thus, whenever this ghastly death ship or crew of zombies walking across the wave are seen, it is best to try to avoid them, steering clear of their path.

Any encounter with the Funa-yurei results in a request for a ladle. If the undead are given the ladle they requested, they use it to scoop up water and flood the boat, causing it to sink. If there is no ladle, or the living refuse to provide one, the Funa-yurei attempt to capsize or sink the vessel in some other way. The one surefire away to escape this fate is to carry a ladle with holes in the bottom, or no bottom at all. When the monsters try to flood the boat they are unable to scoop up any water no matter how hard they try. Frustrated and confused, they leave a few minutes later and sink back to the bottom of the sea until the next storm.

Of course, the Funa-yurei can be fought in physical combat, but it is a difficult battle to win. The zombie-like creatures seek to throw the living overboard and may ignore combat in favor of damaging the ship so that it may be cast adrift, capsized or sunken. Rather than try to fight them, it is best to knock them over the railing and back into the sea or the deck of their own boat. If all the demons can be repelled, they leave the vessel and sink back to the sea floor until another day brings another vessel to be attacked.

The worst fate is to be dragged into their boat, damned to become one of them. The only way to escape from the boat is to force the fate on to someone else. The living may die by drowning and other dangers of the sea inflicted upon them by these demons. Sometimes flickering lights on the demon boat are used to trick sailors into going farther from shore and out into rough seas.



Funa-yurei, Demon Corpses

Alignment: Diabolic only.

Attributes: I.Q. 1D6, M.E. 2D6, M.A. 2D6, P.S. 2D6+6, P.P. 2D6, P.E. 2D6, P.B. 1D6, Spd. 1D6+3

Armor Rating: 8; any attack less than 9 does no damage even if it hits.

Hit Points: 5D6+6 plus P.E. attribute number.

S.D.C.: 6D6

Discorporation: Turns into a column of water that collapses into the sea or if on land, quickly seeps into the ground and evaporates.

Threat Level: x4. A Lesser Demon.

Horror Factor: 13.

Size: Average size for an adult male.

Weight: Average weight for an adult male.

Average Life Span: Until it can be replaced then it is allowed to rest in peace.

P.P.E.: 4D6

Natural Abilities: Swim, Nightvision 600 feet (183 m). Dead corpses turned into something supernatural and horrible, melee weapons, guns, physical combat and even fire (and energy blasts) inflict half damage, and the Funa-yurei don't really die. Reducing the monster's S.D.C. and Hit Points to zero causes them to discorporate, but they return to undeath as Funa-yurei with the next storm. The phantom boat they pilot is able to

create a light that can be seen for 2D4 miles (3.2 to 12.8 km) to lure ships to them or into dangerous waters.

Walk the Waves (special): Funa-yurei can both swim and walk on water.

Vulnerabilities: Never appear on dry land, only in deep waters. They are slow and methodical, and driven by instinct to sink boats and drown the living. Vulnerable to most weapons, but suffer half damage.

R.C.C. Skills or Equivalents (do not increase with experience): Climb 70%, Language: Japanese 80% and Swim 98%.

Average Level of Experience: 1D4.

Attacks per Melee: Four.

Damage: Claw attack: 2D6. Bite: 1D6 damage.

Bonuses (in addition to attributes): +2 strike and parry, +4 dodge, +4 to roll with impact, +2 to save vs Horror Factor. If not in contact with water or on a boat in water, all bonuses are lost.

Magic: None.

Psionics: None.

Enemies: Humans who make their living on the water.

Allies: None.

Habitat: Can be found in any coastal regions, rivers or lakes.

Hanadaka-tengu

The Hanadaka-tengu is a distinct species of Tengu that live in the Japanese islands. They can be very vain creatures who take great pride in their knowledge. If one can persuade them to instruct them, the demons make excellent, if strict, teachers. The best bet for anyone meeting one is to be very humble towards them. The person full of pride may find himself transported somewhere distant against his will (clothes optional). Though arrogant themselves, Hanadaka-tengu hate that trait in humans. There are accounts of them putting prideful samurai in their place. They also level cruel pranks at mortals who annoy or anger them. In these cases, the victim may be dragged off to a distant mountain, dropped into the sea, or left at a remote location where he must endure hardship to get back home, or even survive. There is a story of a stark-naked man who fell from the sky over Tokyo in 1812. He was not hurt and said his last memory was hiking on a mountain near Kyoto. It was not known what he did to anger the Hanadaka-tengu, but obviously he did something.

Hanadaka-tengu are large, muscular creatures that resemble monstrous humans with wings, a very long nose and bright red skin, and always appear to be in great physical shape. For clothes, they wear simple garments and clogs for shoes. Most have mercurial temperaments, laughing or calm, if stern, one moment, and indignant, angry or outraged the next. They have little patience for humans and seem them as idiots and troublemakers in need of being humbled and educated.

Hanadaka-tengu

Alignment: Unprincipled, Anarchist or Aberrant evil only.

Attributes: I.Q. 2D6+10, M.E. 3D6, M.A. 2D6, P.S. 3D6+10 (Supernatural), P.P. 3D6+4, P.E. 3D6, P.B. 2D6, Spd. 3D6 on ground, 4D6x10 flying.

Armor Rating: 10; any attack less than 11 does no damage even if it hits.

Hit Points: 6D6 plus P.E. attribute number.

S.D.C.: 2D4x10

Discorporation: Disappears in a flash of light, followed by a gust of wind.

Threat Level: x6. A Greater Monster or Demon.

Horror Factor: 14

Size: 6 feet and up (1.8 m).

Weight: 220 pounds and up (99 kg).

Average Life Span: Can live to be over 500.

P.P.E.: 3D6

Natural Abilities: Fly and glide, Nightvision 1,000 feet (305 m), see the invisible, resistant to cold (even magic cold does half damage), magically understands and speaks all languages 98%, Bio-Regeneration 2D6 Hit Points/S.D.C. per melee round.

Teleportation (special): Hanadaka-tengu can teleport itself and up to an additional 400 pounds (180 kg) as far away as 100 miles (160 km) +20 miles (32 km) per level of experience. The chance of success is 65% +5% per level. A failed roll means the teleport does not happen plus the monster loses all bonuses for the rest of that melee round.

Metamorphosis Animal and Human (special): Hanadaka-tengu possess the ability to shape-change into birds and large land animals, as well as humans at will.

Vulnerabilities: Have a very large and fragile ego, and loves to show off its knowledge and skills.

R.C.C. Skills or Equivalents (do not increase with experience): Art 90%, Barter 90%, Begging 90%, Creative Writing 90%, Hand to Hand: Martial Arts (may replace with one from Ninjas & Superspies), History: Japan 90%, Land Navigation 90%, Language: Japanese 98%, Literacy: Japanese 98%, Lore: Religion 80%, Lore: Demons and Monsters 80%, Public Speaking, plus select four Domestic skills, four Physical skills, four Science, four Technical skills, four Wilderness Skills, and three W.P. skills.

Average Level of Experience: 2D4+1

Attacks per Melee: Five.

Damage: Claws/Punch: 2D6 damage. Kick: 3D6 damage, or by weapon.

Will have a number of ancient Japanese weapons handy. Also carries a fan that can generate powerful gusts of wind (has a 80% chance of knocking someone off their feet, and if so, that person loses initiative and one melee action).

Bonuses (in addition to attributes): +2 to initiative and perception, +2 to strike, parry, dodge on ground; +5 in the air, +4 to roll with impact and pull punch, +6 to save vs Horror Factor.

Magic: None.

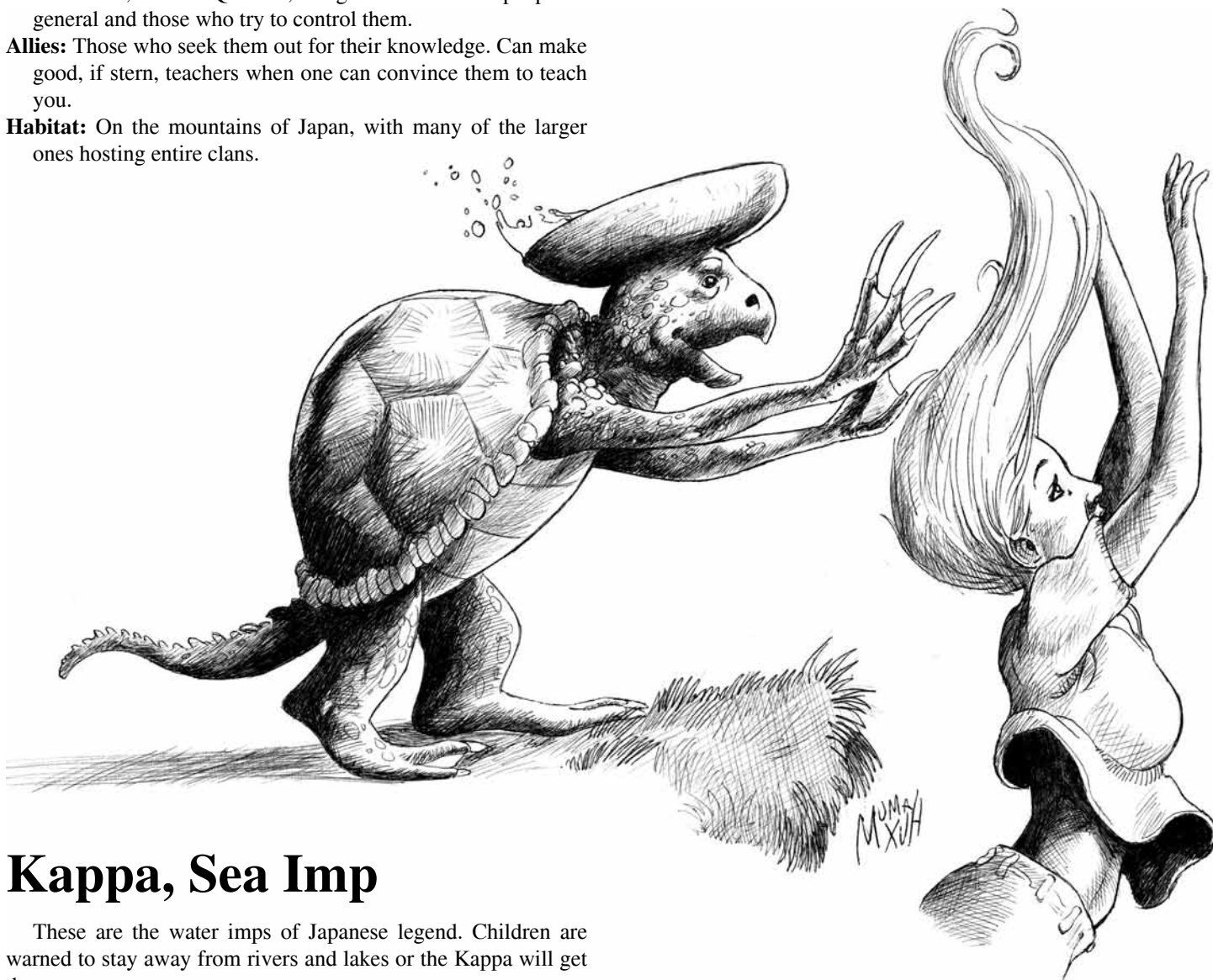
Psionics: Considered a Master Psychic. Needs a 10 or higher to save vs psionic attack. I.S.P.: 2D4x10+M.E. attribute number. Meditation (0), Mind Block (4), Psionic Invisibility (10), Read Dimensional Portal (6), See Aura (6), Sense Dimensional Anomaly (4), Sense Time (2), and Telepathy (4).



Enemies: Beings that hate knowledge and learning or destroy art and books, Demon Quellers, arrogant warriors and people in general and those who try to control them.

Allies: Those who seek them out for their knowledge. Can make good, if stern, teachers when one can convince them to teach you.

Habitat: On the mountains of Japan, with many of the larger ones hosting entire clans.



Kappa, Sea Imp

These are the water imps of Japanese legend. Children are warned to stay away from rivers and lakes or the Kappa will get them.

The average Kappa is about the size of a 6 to 10 year old child. Their skin color ranges from green to yellow with a tortoise-like shell on their back. Their mouth is beak-like and they have skinny arms, webbed hands and feet, plus sharp claws. A foul odor of fish is always around them. The most noticeable feature is a basin on the top of their head that is filled with water.

They are mischievous creatures that like playing pranks on humans. Their idea of a prank can be rather harsh. It can be as innocent as passing gas or peeping up a woman's skirt. It can also include drowning people or animals and rape. In the case of drowning victims, they often eat their liver, or shirikodama, a mythical organ near the anus. Some of the women they rape do become pregnant but the baby is always horribly deformed, and traditionally, it would be cut up and buried on land.

In contrast with the above, they are also extremely obsessed with being polite. The wisest choice when meeting a Kappa is to deeply bow to it. It will return the bow and empty the water from the basin on the top of its head, greatly weakening it. They will also never break an oath, keeping any promise they make.

They also like to challenge people to tests of skill, favorites being Sumo Wrestling and Shogi. In the case of a Sumo chal-

lenge, make sure it is on land and always bow before the start of the match.

"Kappa-no-kawa-nagare" ("a kappa drowning in a river") is a popular saying meaning even an expert can fail.

Kappa, Water Creature

Alignment: Miscreant evil.

Attributes: I.Q. 2D6, M.E. 2D6, M.A. 1D6+2, P.S. 3D6+12 (Supernatural), P.P. 3D6, P.E. 2D6, P.B. 2D6, Spd. 2D6 on land, but 3D6+10 in water.

Armor Rating: 13; any attack less than 14 does no damage even if it hits.

Hit Points: 4D6 plus P.E. attribute number.

S.D.C.: 1D4x10.

Discorporation: When slain, leaves behind a small pool of fetid smelling water that evaporates in less than a minute.

Threat Level: x4. Prankster and a Lesser Demon.

Horror Factor: 8. This may seem low, but it is such a common creature of folklore that it's not seen as a major threat.

Size: 4 to 5 feet (1.2 to 1.5 meters).

Weight: 55 to 80 pounds (24 to 36 kg).

Average Life Span: 1D6x10+150 years.

P.P.E.: 6D6

Natural Abilities: Nightvision 1,000 feet (305 m), a natural swimmer, it can breathe in water and on dry land, can survive depths up to five miles (8 km), resistant to cold (half damage), natural body armor/shell, magically understands all languages 80%, Bio-Regenerate 1D6 Hit Points/S.D.C. per melee round, and Kappa are also notorious for their flatulence.

Vulnerabilities: The greatest weakness a Kappa has is the water in the basin on its head. If you can cause it to be emptied by tricking it into bowing for example, it loses most of its strength and has to return to the water. When the basin is empty it only has 25% of its normal strength, and all bonuses are also cut in half. Its main goal will be to get to water and only fights to achieve that goal.

They also have a great fondness for cucumbers. An offering of a cucumber with a person's name written on it keeps that Kappa from harming that person. Cucumbers can also be used to distract one long enough to make an escape.

R.C.C. Skills or Equivalents (do not increase with experience): First Aid 75%, Holistic Medicine 80%, Language: Japanese 90%, Shogi 60%, Swim 98%, and Sumo Wrestling.

Average Level of Experience: 1D6.

Attacks per Melee: Two on land, four in water.

Damage: Restrained punch or kick: 1D6. Full Strength Punch as per Supernatural P.S. Claw attack: 3D6+4 damage. Bite: 1D6+2 damage.

Bonuses (in addition to attributes): +1 on initiative, +2 to strike, parry and dodge, +3 to disarm and roll with punch, and +4 to save vs Horror Factor.

Magic: None.

Psionics: None.

Enemies: Known to attack humans in water and try to drown them. Likes to lure children into the water to eat them!

Allies: In direct contradiction to the above, Kappa sometimes save people from drowning and may help humans irrigate a crop. It is said Kappa are the ones who taught humans to set bones. May even befriend humans in exchange for gifts, especially cucumbers, their favorite food.

Habitat: Anywhere there is water but only coastal regions around the islands of Japan and parts of Asia, as well as some lakes and rivers.

Karasu-tengu

Karasu-tengu are the foot soldiers of the Tengu world. They are very crafty and dangerous foes, having been blamed for causing all sorts of chaos from attacks to spreading plagues. They are unlike the Hanadaka-tengu as they will happily commit random acts of violence. Will also attack anyone who intrudes into their territory or insults their masters.

A way they enjoy causing trouble is to take possession of the target, driving him to madness and committing horrible acts.



When the situation is at its worse, they will leave the poor victim to deal with the fallout. Also like to tempt the good-hearted off the proper path, leading them to ruin. The fun of spiriting monks or adepts to random locations around Japan is a favorite pastime.

Even with these horrible acts, they are still not completely hated. There are many legends of them training warriors if approached with the proper amount of respect.

They are human-sized with wings, with a bird or dog-like face. When clothed, it is dressed as a Buddhist Monk.

Karasu-tengu, Warrior Demons

Alignment: Anarchist and evil, for the most part, but can be any alignment.

Attributes: I.Q. 3D6, M.E. 3D6, M.A. 3D6, P.S. 4D6+5 (Supernatural), P.P. 4D6, P.E. 3D6, P.B. 2D6, Spd. 3D6 on ground, 4D6 flying.

Armor Rating: 12; any attack less than 13 does no damage even if it hits.

Hit Points: 1D6x10 plus P.E. attribute number.

S.D.C.: 2D4x10

Discorporation: Disappears in a flash of light, leaving a single feather on the ground.

Threat Level: x6. Predator and Lesser Demon.

Horror Factor: 14

Size: 5 to 6 feet (1.5 to 1.8 m).

Weight: 160 pounds and up (72 kg).

Average Life Span: Hundreds of years if not immortal.

P.P.E.: 1D6x10

Natural Abilities: Fly and glide, Nightvision 1,000 feet (305 m), see the invisible, resistant to cold (even magic cold does half damage), magically understands and speaks all languages 80%, Bio-Regeneration 1D6 Hit Points/S.D.C. per melee round.

Teleportation (special): Karasu-tengu can teleport itself and up to and additional 400 pounds (180 kg) as far away as 100 miles (160 km) +20 miles (32 km) per level of experience. The chance of success is 60% +2% per level. A failed roll means the teleport does not happen plus the monster loses all bonuses for the rest of that melee round.

Metamorphosis Animal (special): Karasu-tengu possess the ability to shape-change into any type of animal at will.

Possession (special): The victim being targeted for possession must make a save vs possession and needs a 14 or higher (apply any bonuses to save). A failed roll means his body is taken over. He remains under its control till the Karasu-tengu leaves or is forced out by an Exorcism (the demon is -4 to save).

Cloud Human Minds (special): The intended target gets a saving throw vs psionics/mind control. If he fails to save, all bonuses and skills are reduced by half for two minutes per level of the Karasu-tengu.

Vulnerabilities: Like other Tengu, its main weakness is its arrogance.

R.C.C. Skills or Equivalent (do not increase with experience): Hand to Hand: Martial Arts (may replace with one from Ninjas & Superspies), Land Navigation 80%, Literacy: Japanese 98%, Tracking (people) 80%, and select four Physical skills and four W.P.s (may include modern weapons).

Average Level of Experience: 1D6.

Attacks per Melee: Six.

Damage: Bite: 1D6 damage. Claws/Punch: 2D6+3 damage.

Kick: 3D6 damage or by weapon. As a warrior, the Tengu always has a number of ancient Japanese weapons handy.

Bonuses (in addition to attributes): +2 to initiative and Perception Rolls, +4 to strike, parry, and dodge on ground; +5 in the air, +4 to roll with impact and pull punch, +6 to save vs Horror Factor.

Magic: None.

Psionics: None.

Enemies: The enemies of the Tengu and anyone else who gets on their nerves.

Allies: They are the soldiers of the Tengu and will do as ordered.

Habitat: On the mountains of Japan, with many of the larger ones hosting entire clans.



Kitsune

Among a crowd of trickster Yokai, the Kitsune manages to stand out. There are thousands of statues of them in the shrines across Japan. They are one of the most powerful of the Yokai with intelligence on the level of humans or higher.

Anyone dealing with a mature Kitsune should always be careful as they are unpredictable beings with great power. Their pranks can often become deadly. A classic example is a Kitsune disguised as a human may use a light to lead people astray and get them lost in the woods, but not attack or otherwise harm them. A Kitsune would think it is funny to use the same trick to lead people off the edge of a cliff or into a bog.

There are many stories of them using their shape-shifting ability to assume the form of beautiful women to seduce men. They will often live with these men for years till they have taken everything they want. A common belief in Feudal Japan was that any encountered solitary women, especially after dark, was most likely a Kitsune.

A person possessed by a Kitsune will often appear to be insane. They will run through the streets naked or lie on the ground, foaming at the mouth or yelp like a fox. The term Kitsunetsuki (state of being possessed by a fox) was often used to describe the mentally ill up to the 20th Century. An odd side effect was a person who was possessed by a Kitsune will never enjoy the foods favored by the Kitsune again.

The Kitsune are also associated with Inari (Shinto deity of rice), serving as her messengers. The ones that serve Inari are white in color and are considered a good omen. They are believed to be able to ward off evil, and besides protecting shrines, they will also make petitions on behalf of the locals. The statues of them are even able to ward off evil. Anything of evil alignment will have to make a Horror Factor roll of 14 to pass one of these statues.

Kitsune

Alignment: Most often Anarchist or Unprincipled but can be any alignment.

Attributes: I.Q. 2D6+7, M.E. 3D6, M.A. 2D6+11, P.S. 2D6+3, P.P. 2D6+5, P.E. 2D6+9, P.B. 2D6+9, Spd. 2D6+11.

Armor Rating: 10; any attack less than 11 does no damage even if it hits.

Hit Points: 4D6 plus P.E. attribute number.

S.D.C.: 3D4x10

Discorporation: Disappears in a flash of light with the long yelp of a fox.

Threat Level:

Tails 2-5: x4; Prankster, a Lesser Monster.

Tails 6-8: x6; Prankster, a Greater Monster.

Tails 9: x8; Prankster. Some would say at this point they are at the level of a lesser god.

Horror Factor: 12 for one with 2-8 tails if they are hostile, 16 for one with 9 tails no matter what.

Size: 3 to 4 feet (0.9 to 1.2 m) from nose to end of tail (0.91 to 1.2 meters).

Weight: 11 to 14 pounds (4.9 to 6.3 kg).

Average Life Span: Unknown, at least 1,000 years old, possibly twice that long. **Note:** The Kitsune's fur becomes white or gold by the time they get their eighth tail, which should serve as a warning that this is an elder and powerful creature.

P.P.E.: 2D6x10

Natural Abilities: Nightvision 1,000 feet (305 m), see the invisible, magically understands and speaks all languages (90%), and Bio-Regeneration 1D6 Hit Points/S.D.C. per melee round. The Kitsune start gaining powers when they grow their second tail at 100 years old. A new tail is said to grow every 100 years.

Second Tail: +2 M.A., +4D6 S.D.C., +6D6 P.P.E. and can shape-shift at will into any natural object. That ranges from humans to anything found in nature like animals and trees, or even a rock, but not man-made objects.

May select three powers from the Physical Psionics list.

Third Tail: +2 I.Q., +2 M.E., +6D6 P.P.E., and is able to create illusions that will fool most people. The illusion affects all five senses and requires a saving throw vs psionics to break it. Roughly equivalent to the spell, only this is a special psionic ability. Costs 25 I.S.P. every time an illusion is created. Victims save vs psionic attack.

Fourth Tail: +2 M.A., +2 P.P., +4D6 S.D.C., +4D6 I.S.P. and breathe fire: 4D6 damage, range 30 feet (9.1 meters), and select three powers from the Sensitive Psionics list.

Fifth Tail: +2 P.S., +2 P.E., +6D6 P.P.E., can now fly at a Spd of 1D4x10+20. Gains the ability to possess humans. The Kitsune enters through the space between the fingernails or through the breast, via touch. The victim must roll to save vs possession and needs a 14 or higher (plus bonuses, if any). A failed roll means the victim's body is taken over by the crea-

ture. The Kitsune remains in control, with the person experiencing everything but unable to stop it until it leaves on its own (can do that at any time) or is forced out by an exorcism (the Kitsune is -3 to save vs Exorcism).

Sixth Tail: +2 I.Q., +2 M.E., +4D6 S.D.C., +5D6 I.S.P., and select three powers from the Physical Psionics list plus Psionic Invisibility (10).

Seventh Tail: +2 M.A., +2 P.P. and +6D6 P.P.E., and the P.E. and P.S. attributes become Supernatural.

Eighth Tail: +2 P.S., +2 P.E., +4D6 S.D.C., +6D6 I.S.P., and select three powers from the Healing Psionics list.

Ninth Tail: +2 I.Q., +2 M.E., +1D6x10 S.D.C., +6D6 P.P.E., and A.R. is increased to 16. Select three powers from any Psionics list, plus the following abilities: Psychic Omni-Sight (15), Remote Viewing (10), and See Dimensional Anomaly (4), (see **Rifts®** for psionics descriptions).

Vulnerabilities: Exorcism and the Hoshi no tama (star ball) is the biggest weakness of the Kitsune. A star ball is a small, glowing ball about the size of a lemon or plum. When in its fox form the star ball is safely carried in the mouth or on one of the tails. When disguised as a human, or when possessing someone, the star ball must be carried. If the ball is taken away from it for more than 1D6+12 months, the Kitsune dies. Perhaps needless to say, a Kitsune becomes desperate to get it back, and can be manipulated by the person who possesses its star ball. Even after a few weeks, most Kitsune are willing to make any deal necessary for its return, and can be forced to do all sorts of things against its will. **Note:** When the Kitsune's time without the star ball runs out, it must make a roll on the save vs coma/death. A successful save means it lives for 1D4 more weeks. A failed roll means it lapses into a coma and dies within 1D4 days unless someone returns its star ball to it.

Even though Kitsune are masters of disguise and impersonation, it cannot fool a dog. All dogs and canine beings recognize it as a) a fox, and b) as a dangerous supernatural creature, and start barking at the sight of a Kitsune. If the creature does not immediately flee, the dog(s) attacks and fights to kill!

Kitsune also have a weakness for alcohol. When drunk there is a 01-25% chance that it shows some of its true form, such as one or more of its tails, or fur, or fox eyes, and so on.

R.C.C. Skills or Equivalents (do not increase with experience): Disguise 90%, Domestic Skills (select four skills +30%), Escape Artist 70%, Impersonation 80%, Language: Japanese 98%, Literacy: Japanese 98%, Seduction 80%, and magically understands and speaks all languages. Starting with the third tail and each subsequent tail, the creature learns two new human skills. Make the two selections from ONE of the following skill categories: Communication, Domestic, Espionage, Medical, Paranormal, Rogue, Technical, Weapon Proficiencies (either) or Wilderness.

Average Level of Experience: 2D4 (2-5 tails).

Attacks per Melee: Five.

Damage: Claw attack: 2D6 damage, and bite: 2D4 damage.

Bonuses (in addition to attributes): +2 to initiative and Perception Rolls, +1 strike, parry, and dodge, +2 to roll with impact, +6 to save vs Horror Factor.

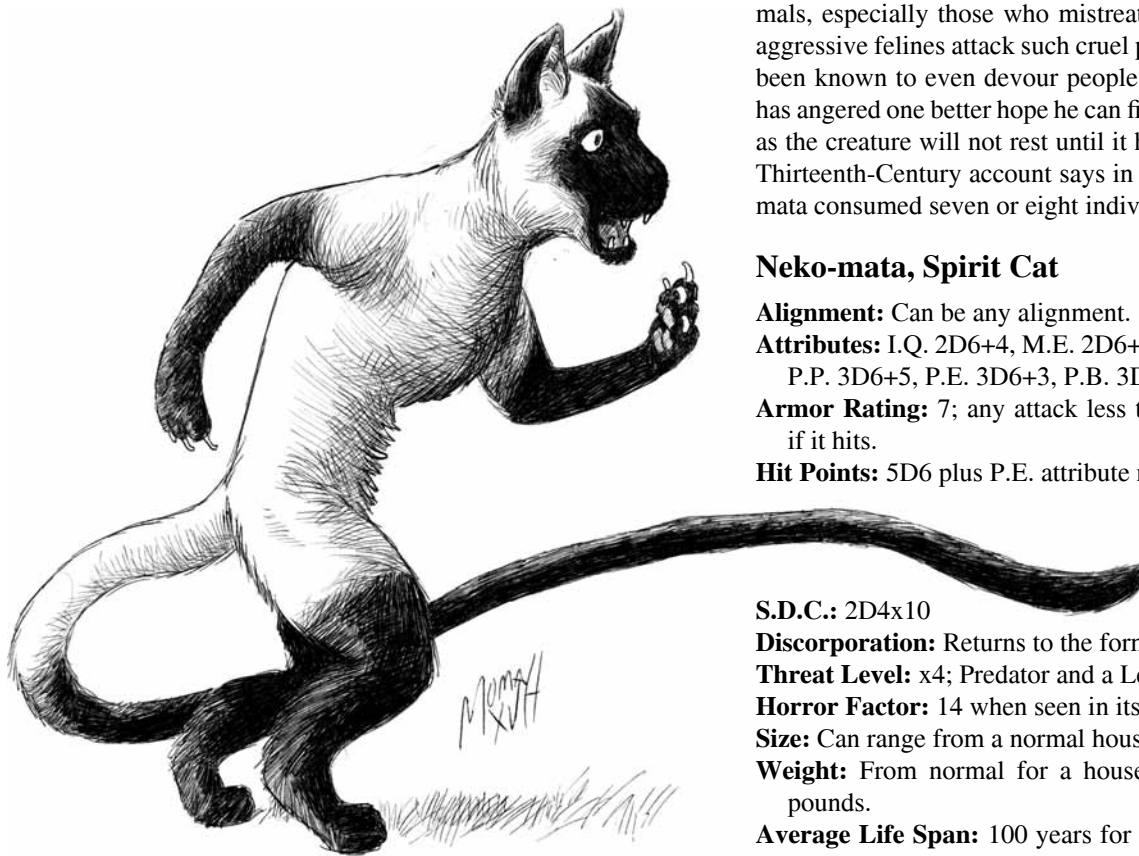
Magic: None, other than Natural Abilities.

Psionics: Considered a Master Psychic. Needs a 10 or higher to save vs psionic attacks. I.S.P. 2D4x10 plus those gained with additional tails.

Enemies: The victims of their pranks and their family and friends, those who are rude and disrespectful toward it, Demon Quellers and anyone who hunts them, and especially those who steal their star ball and try to manipulate/control them.

Allies: The average person who has not had a Kitsune pull a prank on them should treat the creature with courtesy and respect. If a Kitsune befriends a mortal, it is surprisingly loyal until it feels betrayed by him. Kitsune demons/spirits are known to seduce and engage in sex with mortals they find attractive or take a liking to. Some Japanese brag about having Kitsune blood. Some people see Kitsune as messengers of the god Inari.

Habitat: They love the wilderness, but can be found anywhere in Japan and sometimes other parts of Asia and the world.



Neko-mata

According to legend, under certain circumstances, a housecat that has lived for more than 13 years and weighs more than 8.5 pounds (3.85 kg) or has a very long tail can turn into a supernatural creature known as the Neko-mata. When this happens the cat becomes intelligent and gains a number of magical powers. The Neko-mata's tail also becomes forked, and the creature is often seen walking on its hind legs like a human.

The Neko-mata usually stays in or near the house where it lived before its supernatural transformation, though some become wanderers. How they behave is determined by how they were treated when just a normal cat. If loved and treated with kindness, the supernatural feline has a *Principled* or *Scrupulous* alignment and regards its old owners with love and kindness in return. This often translates into the Neko-mata becoming something of a protector and guardian angel to them, though it can

also become a merciless avenging spirit if those it cares about are mistreated, abused or murdered.

If the feline was mostly left to its own devices and neither treated poorly nor with a great amount of affection, its alignment is Unprincipled or Anarchist, and the cat is more of a free spirit that takes only a mild interest in its owners and the affairs of people. This is the Neko-mata that is most likely to become a wandering spirit.

Neko-mata who were abused or tortured as a cat, or witnessed other animals being cruelly mistreated are usually *Aberrant* or *Miscreant* evil alignments and may become creatures of vengeance. Such animals have a low regard for all humans and don't trust any of them; demons either. An evil or vengeful Neko-mata has a short temper and low tolerance for anyone who engages in torture and cruelty, including bullies and those who mistreat animals, especially those who mistreat animals. These violent and aggressive felines attack such cruel people and demons, and have been known to even devour people in their anger. Anyone who has angered one better hope he can find a way to appease its anger as the creature will not rest until it has tasted bloody revenge. A Thirteenth-Century account says in one night, an enraged Neko-mata consumed seven or eight individuals.

Neko-mata, Spirit Cat

Alignment: Can be any alignment.

Attributes: I.Q. 2D6+4, M.E. 2D6+3, M.A. 2D6+2, P.S. 3D6+4, P.P. 3D6+5, P.E. 3D6+3, P.B. 3D6+3, Spd. 3D6+8.

Armor Rating: 7; any attack less than 8 does no damage even if it hits.

Hit Points: 5D6 plus P.E. attribute number.

S.D.C.: 2D4x10

Discorporation: Returns to the form of a normal, dead cat.

Threat Level: x4; Predator and a Lesser monster.

Horror Factor: 14 when seen in its true form.

Size: Can range from a normal house cat to 5 feet (1.5 m).

Weight: From normal for a house cat up to several hundred pounds.

Average Life Span: 100 years for every year of life it had as a normal cat.

P.P.E.: 2D6x10+ P.E. attribute number.

Natural Abilities: Nightvision: 2,000 feet (610 m), Climbing 98%, Swim 70%, leap 10 feet (3 m) high or across, has retractable claws, magically understands all languages (but can only speak in dreams) and Bio-Regenerates at a rate of 1D4 per melee round.

Enter into People's Dreams (special): The Neko-mata can enter people's dreams to speak with them. When in the dream the creature can speak and communicate with the dreamer and can show them the way in or out of somewhere, offer advice, suggestions and warnings, and if the Neko-mata visits in many dreams, can even teach a person a new skill, provided the animal knows the skill itself. The target gets a roll vs psionics to stop the intrusive dreams if they are unwanted, but some people find the dream visits pleasant, playful and helpful. To teach a new skill require 20 nights of dream visitations within a 30 night period. In the dreams the Neko-mata may appear as

an ordinary cat or as a large, roughly man-sized feline (never more than 5 feet/1.5 m tall) that walks on its hind legs and behaves like a human, or switch from one to the other.

Reanimate the Dead (special): The Neko-mata's greatest and most feared power is the ability to reanimate a dead body. While in the West it was feared that cats would steal the breath of babies, in Japan it was feared they would put it back into the recent dead. The supernatural cat reanimates a dead body by jumping over the body's head three times. The newly risen body does as the Neko-mata commands of it, and has the same stats as before death. However, the body cannot have been dead for more than 48 hours to be animated by the cat. However, once animated, the Neko-mata can control it one day for year that the feline had lived (at least 14, but often as much as 20-24 years.)

Metamorphosis (special and limited): The Neko-mata can change its shape at will, into any breed of cat and retain that appearances for as long as it desires, from hours to years. It may also take the form of any animal (except it deprecates taking the form of small rodents and birds), as well as a human appearance, but can only retain that appearance for a number of hours equal to the number of years that it had lived (at least 14, but often more).

Consume Prey of a Large Size (special): The Neko-mata is able to consume/swallow whole any dead body or unconscious opponent as large as a bull or horse! It cannot consume the awake, living prey.

Create Light (special): The cat is able to create the equivalent of a Globe of Daylight that radiates up to 100 feet (30.5 m) in diameter.

Vulnerabilities: Its has a strong desire to drink lamp oil and fish oils, fish and fowl are its favorite foods, and still gets drugged out by catnip (reduce Spd, skill performance and all combat bonuses by half). The effects of catnip last for 1D6+2 minutes, and other drugs also have a profound effect on the Neko-mata, with symptoms lasting 50% longer.

R.C.C. Skills or Equivalents (do not increase with experience): Disguise 70%, Hunting, Language: Japanese 98%, Literacy: Japanese 90%, Climbing 98%, Prowl 90%, Rope Works 80%, Tailing 80%, and knows four skills from both the Domestic (+15% to Fishing and Sing skills) and Wilderness skill Categories at the equivalent of 8th level proficiency regardless of its actual experience level.

Average Level of Experience: 2D6.

Attacks per Melee: Five.

Damage: Claw attack: 3D6 damage. Bite: 2D6 damage.

Bonuses (in addition to attributes): +3 on all Perception Rolls, +2 on initiative, +2 to strike, dodge, and disarm, +4 to parry and pull punch, +4 to roll with impact, and +3 to save vs Horror Factor.

Magic: None.

Psionics: I.S.P. 2D4x10 +M.E. attribute number. Considered a Major Psychic. Abilities are limited to Empathy (4), Meditation (0), Sense Evil (2), Sense Magic (3), and its unique ability to enter a person's dreams to communicate with him (no I.S.P. cost).

Enemies: Anyone who abuses cats, Demon Quellers and any demon hunter, evil mages, wicked supernatural beings, and anyone who tortures, torments or cruelly enslaves animals and/or people, but especially animals.

Allies: Often protect humans who take good care of it, when it was just a normal cat, or who cares for animals or is generally kind.

Habitat: Anywhere you would find a house cat in Asia, but can be found, from time to time, anywhere in the world.

Nue

The Nue is a very strange creature with the head of a monkey, the body of a tanuki, the limbs of a tiger and the tail of a snake. It is a malevolent supernatural being that often torments humans. The good news is it spends most of its time aloft playing in the clouds. It is unknown why it sometimes targets humans (and D-Bees in **Rifts®**), or the reason for picking a particular victim.

A famous account of a Nue attack is in the *The Tale of the Heike*, in which it describes how Emperor Konoe was beset by nightmares and illness. A black cloud appeared over the palace in Kyoto at two A.M. every night in the year 1153. The samurai, Minamoto no Yorimasa, finally waited on the roof of the palace and fired a magic arrow into the black cloud. A dead Nue fell out and legend says he sunk the body into the Sea of Japan.

Nue Air Spirit

Alignment: Miscreant or Diabolic evil only.

Attributes: I.Q. 2D6, M.E. 2D6+2, M.A.2D6, P.S. 3D6, P.P. 3D6, P.E. 3D6, P.B. 1D6, Spd. 3D6 in animal form, 1D4x10 as a cloud.

Armor Rating: 6; any attack less than 7 does no damage even if it hits. As a cloud it's raised to 14.

Hit Points: 5D6 plus P.E. attribute number.

S.D.C.: 1D4x10

Discorporation: The physical body turns into a black cloud that blows away in a sudden gust of wind. When slain as a cloud it first turns back into its monkey-like form before becoming a black cloud that blows away.

Threat Level: x4. A Lesser Monster or malevolent spirit.

Horror Factor: 14 when seen and 12 for its yell.

Size: 35 to 45 inches tall (89 to 114 centimeters).

Weight: 15 to 20 pounds (6.8 to 9 kg).

Average Life Span: Unknown, at least 400 years, but may be immortal.

P.P.E.: 3D4x10

Natural Abilities: Nightvision 2,000 feet (614 m), impervious to cold (magic cold does half damage), magically understands all languages, but can only speak in nightmares, and Bio-Regeneration 1D6 Hit Points/S.D.C. per melee round.

Create Nightmares (special): Its most dangerous ability is being able to cause nightmares. The victim not only suffers from a terrifying nightmare, but also becomes ill. Every night, a roll to save vs disease is necessary. A 16 or better is required.

Failure to save means the person suffers 1D4 horrible nightmares for the night. It gets worse, he also takes 1D6 damage and feels tired and worn out (fatigues in half the time, -1 on all combat rolls, and -10% on skill performance). Hit Points and S.D.C. lost due to a night of bad dreams do not recover until the character can get a full night's sleep (7-9 hours). Until that happens, the character also recovers I.S.P. and P.P.E. at half the usual rate. A successful save means a restful, dreamless slumber.



Live Among the Clouds (special): Even in its physical form the Nue can walk and run on clouds as if they were solid. The creature can also burrow through them and enjoys sleeping inside of them, sometimes for months and years at a time. During storms the Nue can ride lightning bolts to the ground.

Metamorphosis Black Cloud (special): The Nue is able to turn into a small or large black cloud at will. The cloud can move or rest stationary, and hang low, close to the ground or up among the clouds, as the creature deems fit. As a cloud, the Nue has its own ability to hover and float, and does not have to go with the wind. Of course, odd behavior by a cloud may attract attention. It can maintain its cloud form indefinitely. When done bothering mortals, the Black Cloud floats up into the sky and disappears among the clouds or may vanish during a storm.

Vulnerabilities: All weapons do damage to this creature when it is in physical form. However, even as a cloud it can still suffer physical damage, and fire, heat, lightning and energy attacks inflict full damage. Magical fire and energy attacks inflict double damage. Punches, melee weapons and bullets do no damage to the cloud; explosions do one quarter their normal damage. Cannot swim and can be drowned.

R.C.C. Skills or Equivalents (do not increase with experience): Acrobatics 90%, Climbing 95%, Land Navigation 80%, Prowl 65%, Tailing 65%, Tracking (people) 60%, and Wilderness Survival 60%.

Average Level of Experience: 1D6.

Attacks per Melee: Four.

Damage: Claw attack: 2D6, bite: 1D6 damage, or by handheld melee weapon or nightmares.

Bonuses (in addition to attributes): +3 to Strike, Parry and Dodge but only when in the air, +4 to save vs Horror Factor.

Magic: None.

Psionics: None.

Enemies: Mortals in general and anyone allied with them.

Allies: A loner by nature, but may work with other evil beings, including sorcerers and demons, as long as it has fun.

Habitat: Prefers to live in storm clouds and sometimes are encountered during and after bad storms.

Nure-onna

The Nure-onna is one nasty snake you don't ever want to run into. It has a very large body with the head of a woman and two human arms. It is always on the lookout for easy prey. Even with its large size she has no problems hiding in shallow water and sees lakes, rivers and swamps as places to live and hunt. A favorite trick is to show her human upper body above the water and pretend to be drowning to lure in victims into her clutches. Wicked and cruel, the Nure-onna enjoys frightening and drowning mortals.

Nure-onna, the Serpent

Alignment: Miscreant or Diabolic.

Attributes: I.Q. 2D4+2, M.E. 2D6+2, M.A. 2D4, P.S. 4D6+5 (Supernatural), P.P. 2D6+8, P.E. 3D6, P.B. 1D4, Spd. 2D6+8; triple underwater.

Armor Rating: 13; any attack less than 14 does no damage even if it hits.

Hit Points: 6D6 plus P.E. attribute number.

S.D.C.: 2D6x10

Discorporation: The body shrivels while curling up on itself. Will continue to shrink till it disappears.

Threat Level: x6. Predatory Monster/Lesser Demon.

Horror Factor: 15 as a giant serpent.

Size: 100-1,000 feet (30.5 to 305 m) in serpent form.

Weight: 500 pounds (226 kg) in human form, 2D6 tons as a giant water snake.

Average Life Span: 600 to 1,000 years.

P.P.E.: 6D6

Natural Abilities: Swim, hold breath for 1D6 hours, maximum depth underwater is two miles (3.2 km), Nightvision 600 feet (183 m), Prowl in water 70%, magically understands and speaks all languages, and Bio-Regenerates 1D6 Hit Points/S.D.C. per melee round in water only. No healing when on dry land.

Paralysis (special): The Nure-onna can paralyze its victims with a venomous bite (can release venom once every melee round). Victims must make a saving throw vs poison, 14 or higher. If the character fails to save, his body is unable to move for one full melee round (15 seconds) and afterward he feels numb and sluggish for 1D4 melee rounds; during which speed is reduced by half and all combat rolls suffer a -2 penalty. A successful save means the poison has no effect.

Metamorphosis Female Human (special): The monster can assume the form of an attractive young woman (P.B. 1D4+16)

in a kimono at will. She can maintain this human form all night, but only 30 minutes per level of experience during daylight hours.

Vulnerabilities: Must stay near water and cannot go more than 100 feet (30.5 m) away from it. If forced farther from water, the monster's strength (P.S.) becomes mortal (not Supernatural) and it loses all damage and combat bonuses. For every hour out of water the monster suffers 2D6 points of damage that do not Bio-Regenerate until submerged in water.

R.C.C. Skills or Equivalents (do not increase with experience): Land Navigation 90%, Swim 98%, and Tailing (ships and people along shore) 80%. This creature is not much more than a predatory animal, so no other skills.

Average Level of Experience: 1D6.

Attacks per Melee: Five.

Damage: Claw attack: 2D6 damage. A nipping bite or kiss does 1D4 damage, but can release the paralyzing venom. Full strength fang bite: 4D6 damage. Tail Slash: 3D6 damage. Body slam: 4D6 damage, or by drowning its prey.

Pin/incapacitate on a Natural 17-20. This means the opponent cannot physically attack or move. However, the Nure-onna cannot use other attacks or move either without releasing her opponent.



Crush/squeeze does 1D6 damage per squeeze attack and can be performed on victims pinned/incapacitated. Each “squeeze” counts as one attack.

Bonuses (in addition to attributes): +1 to initiative, +2 to strike, parry, dodge, +3 to roll with impact, +4 to save vs Horror Factor.

Magic: None.

Psionics: None.

Enemies: Preys on mortals and dolphin, but ignores anything else, unless attacked.

Allies: In most cases, she works alone, but some stories say she works with the Ushi Oni. When working with him, the monster takes the guise of a woman and approaches the victim holding a baby. She hands the baby to the intended target and walks out into the water as if she intends to commit suicide. When the person looks at the baby, he finds it getting heavier and heavier to the point he can no longer move. At that time, the Ushi Oni rises from the water and eats him.

Habitat: Coastal regions, harbors, seas, lakes and occasionally, rivers or swamps.

Oni

Oni are the main demons of Japanese folklore and the one you are most likely to encounter in Japan. It is believed they originated in China and came to Japan with the spread of Buddhism. There is a saying, “oni-ni-kanabō” (“oni with an iron club”), which is an expression to be invincible or unbeatable. A violent demon that will attack anyone who bothers it, chasing anyone who wanders into its path.

Oni are giant-sized demons with a wide variety of skin colors (blue, gray, pink and red are the most common), horns on their head and sharp claws. An odd number of eyes, fingers or toes are also very common. The only clothes it wears is a tiger pattern loincloth.

Oni are a common part of the Japanese culture. In the front of a parade will be men wearing Oni masks to ward off bad luck. Buildings will sometimes have roof tiles with Oni on them much like Gargoyles were used in Europe. Some villages hold yearly ceremonies to chase off Oni. In games of tag, the person who is it is called an Oni. Soybeans are tossed outside the home while shouting “Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi!” (“Oni go out! Blessings come in!”).

Oni, Demon Warrior

Alignment: Anarchist (20%), Aberrant (20%), Miscreant (50%), and Diabolic (10%).

Attributes: I.Q. 2D6+3, M.E. 2D6, M.A. 2D6, P.S. 3D6+9 (Supernatural), P.P. 3D6, P.E. 3D6, P.B. 2D6, Spd. 2D6+4.

Armor Rating: 12; any attack less than 13 does no damage even if it hits.

Hit Points: 1D6x10 plus P.E. attribute number.

S.D.C.: 2D4x10

Discorporation: The body disappears in crackling mist, leaving just their loincloth behind and that falls apart in a few seconds.

Threat Level: x4. Predator/soldier and a Lesser Demon.

Horror Factor: 13

Size: 8-9 feet tall (2.4 to 2.7 m).

Weight: 350 to 400 pounds (158 to 180 kg).



Average Life Span: Immortal, until slain.

P.P.E.: 2D6

Natural Abilities: Its abilities are a tough skin and Supernatural Strength, Nightvision 600 feet (183 m), see the invisible, magically understands and speaks all languages, and Bio-Regenerates 2D6 Hit Points/S.D.C. per melee round.

Vulnerabilities: Monkey statues and pendants held outward function as magic or holy symbols that make Oni cringe and hold them at bay and far enough away as to be unable to strike out at the mortal holding the statue or pendant. These items have a Horror Factor of 12 to Oni. Also vulnerable to most weapons, but silver weapons and those made of peach wood inflict double damage.

R.C.C. Skills or Equivalents (do not increase with experience): Language: Japanese 80%, Literacy: Japanese 50%, Land Navigation 70%, Tracking (people) 80%, Wilderness Survival 55%, W.P. Blunt and W.P. Spear.

Average Level of Experience: 1D6.

Attacks per Melee: Five.

Damage: Claws/Punch: 2D6 damage, kick: 3D6 damage, head butt: 2D6 damage, charge with horns: 4D6 damage and has a 01-66% chance of knocking opponents down (victims of knockdown loses one melee attack and initiative), but counts as two attacks.

Bonuses (in addition to attributes): +1 on initiative, +2 to strike, parry and dodge, +4 to pull punch, +3 to roll with impact, and +4 to save vs Horror Factor.

Magic: None.

Psionics: None.

Enemies: Dislike humans/mortals in general and regard them as their playthings, food and slaves. Hate Demon Quellers and heroes, and are wary of practitioners of magic and psychics who sometimes try to control and command Oni as their underlings.

Allies: Form groups with other Oni but seldom bother mortals unless they are found and attacked by them. Oni become a problem for humans when they serve a powerful practitioner of magic, witch or other greater supernatural being.

Habitat: Can be found in the mountain wildernesses, caves and other dark places and remote places. In our modern world, that can include abandoned buildings, tunnel systems and sewers.

Weapon: Prefer a large Iron Club called the Kanabou that inflicts 3D6 damage due to its large size. Can be used one-handed by Oni or other giant creatures, but for a human, the club would be a two-handed weapon. They also like spears.

Tanuki

One of the most common supernatural beings of Japan is the Tanuki, a mostly harmless prankster that enjoys playing tricks on people. This odd little troublemaker and jokester is so popular in Japanese folklore that statues of it are found all over the country.

Tanuki look like a raccoon with intelligent eyes, a mischievous smile, short legs, and black fur with light gray racoon markings. They are said to enjoy straw hats and can often be seen wearing a conical straw hat. However, their most famous feature is their very large testicles. It is said that the testicles of the Tanuki contain most of its magic, which makes them capable of transforming and being used for a wide variety of purposes. According to legend, these appendages can be spread out to the size of 8 tatami mats and used as a bed mat, raincoat or parka, wrestling mat, or expanded and used as drums (apparently striking them does not hurt or bother the Tanuki in the least), and even transform them into a melee weapon.

A common prank by Tanuki is to kidnap or trap an important person heading to a party or festivity. This can be a bride or groom, a priest or wizard, a celebrity, or anyone of some importance going to a party or celebratory event. The creature ties the person up or locks him or her up someplace where he cannot easily escape, and then takes the person's appearance and place at the party by magically turning into the exact likeness of that individual. The Tanuki never harms his victim, just leaves him tied up or stuck somewhere while it goes off to ruin his reputation at the party. If you ever find the bride or groom tied up in a closet before or after the wedding reception, you have had a visit from a Tanuki. Of course, Tanuki LOVE to party, dance, sing, flirt

and drink at parties. Its playful and mischievous nature is sure to make it the center of attention and probably an embarrassing moment or altercation or three. Great fun for the silly prankster, not so good for the reputation of the person it is pretending to be.

A Tanuki's pranks are never deliberately malevolent or cruel, just simple mischief and good intended humor. They do not seek out fights, and if forced into one, can be very unpredictable. The beast uses all sorts of tricks to win any battle, but in most cases it just fights long enough to get away from its attacker(s) and escape into the night. As one might expect, its favorite pranks involve slapstick and embarrassing other people, rarely itself. To a Tanuki, a pie to the face, food fights, slipping on a banana peel, a bucket of water dumped on someone's head, and similar pranks are a laugh riot.



Tanuki, Prankster Spirit or Imp

A supernatural being that is considered a type of prankster Goblin, Faerie or Spirit.

Alignment: Unprincipled (selfish).

Attributes: I.Q. 2D6+3, M.E. 2D6+4, M.A. 2D6+6, P.S. 2D6+1, P.P. 2D6+6, P.E. 2D6+6, P.B. 2D6+3, Spd 3D6+3.

Armor Rating: None.

Hit Points: 4D6 plus P.E. attribute number.

S.D.C.: 1D4x10

Discorporation: Their body turns into a pile of small leaves that are blown away by a gust of wind.

Threat Level: x4. Prankster, Lesser Monster.

Horror Factor: 8 when recognized for what it is, or if seen using their abilities.

Size: 2-3 feet (0.6 to 0.9 m) long or when standing on their hind legs.

Weight: 10-15 pounds (4.5 to 6.8 kg).

Average Life Span: Unknown. Hundreds of years, possibly immortal.

P.P.E.: 2D4x10

Natural Abilities: Nightvision 600 feet (183 m), magically understands and speaks all languages 85% (10% when speaking

Japanese), Bio-Regenerates 1D6 Hit Points/S.D.C. per melee round, and floats in water.

Metamorphosis: Anything! (Special): Tanuki are most famous for their ability to transform. They can disguise themselves as animals, humans, objects or even other monsters. With a successful Disguise skill roll, they can take on any form. What is really unique about their transformation ability is being able to assume the shape of inanimate objects. There is a famous story where a Tanuki turns himself into a tea kettle so his mate can sell him to an antique dealer for money to feed their children.

Temporary Trick Illusion (special): Tanuki have the ability to use illusions on small objects like leaves, paper money, playing cards, coins, small stones, dice and similar small items. This is most often used to make fake money to pass onto unsuspecting victims to pay for services and to buy candy, sweets, sake and other types of libations. The illusion wears off in 24 hours or upon the victim discovering the true nature of the Tanuki in disguise. The creature can use its power of illusion only three times a day +1 per level of experience.

R.C.C. Skills or Equivalents (do not increase with experience): Art 80%, Begging 80%, Calligraphy 80%, Climbing 65%, Dance 80%, Disguise 80%, Escape Artist 70%, Forgery 75%, Gambling 80%, Gambling Dirty Tricks 80%, Impersonation 70%, Intelligence 60%, Palming 60%, Pick Pockets 60%, Playing Musical Instrument: Drums 80%, and Swim 70%.

Average Level of Experience: 1D4+1; a lazy, fun-loving party animal and prankster, Tanuki never put much effort into work or learning things. They are too busy chasing frogs and butterflies, partying, drinking, and playing pranks on humans.

Attacks per Melee: Three.

Damage: Claw attack: 1D4 damage. Bite: 1D4+2 damage.

Bonuses (in addition to attributes): +1 to Strike, Parry and Dodge, +4 to save vs any form of illusion, +2 to save vs Horror Factor.

Vulnerabilities: Their main weakness is a desire for the nicer things in life, food, alcohol, and having a good time. They love Sake, often succumbing to the temptation to sneak into celebrations to get some and overindulging. They are attracted to, and distracted by, parties, dancing, music, and all types of live entertainment, games and fun, especially if good food and drinks are available. Reduce all bonuses by half and the performance of skills is -20% when the little fella is drunk.

Magic: None, other than its own supernatural nature.

Psionics: None.

Enemies: Cruel and evil beings, slavers, and people mad at the Tanuki because they just got cheated, pickpocketed, or pranked.

Allies: Anyone who can take a joke, likes to drink and party, and have a good time – to excess. Some people see Tanuki as good luck, and it is rather common for bars and restaurants to have ceramic statues of Tanuki in front of them. Indeed, a Tanuki who takes a liking to someone will watch his back, leave him little gifts, and be gentle and kind to him. Most are easy-going, and even when things take an unexpected turn, the Tanuki sees it as a grand adventure and goes with the flow. Always finding a way to have some fun along the way.

Habitat: Their primary habitat is the forests and mountains of Japan, small villages, and sometimes the outskirts of cities.

From time to time, Tanuki are found in Korea, China and just about anywhere the promise of a party and fun may take them.

A few new skills

Shogi (Domestic): This a Japanese variant of Chess. It is believed to have originated in India where it spread to China and then Japan. There are many differences between Chess and Shogi. The Shogi board is larger at 9x9, has extra pieces and they are laid out differently. A major difference is the ability to take captured pieces and place them back on the board for your side.
Base Skill: 35% +5% per level of experience.

Sumo: See **Ninjas & Superspies**, page 103 for the full description of this Martial Art Form.

Adventure Ideas

Yokai can be added to your game a number of ways. For games set in Japan, the players may be asked by individuals or shrines to help deal with troublesome Yokai if they are known for dealing with the supernatural. If they have a good reputation, even the government may approach them with work.

Some of the rich also have a twisted hobby when it comes to the supernatural. When you have the money to buy anything you want, what can you buy that is truly unique? A few of them actually collect supernatural creatures for secret zoos. These people are known as collectors and actually compete among each other for the most rare creatures. This is a very secretive group of people.

There are also a number of rumors of criminal organizations and even parts of the government that employ Yokai. An agent that the majority of people do not believe exist can be the perfect operative to use when you need full deniability.

For games set outside Japan, there are still ways to use Yokai. One could always escape from a collector or be sealed into an item that is part of a museum collection. With the ease of global travel, who is to say a Yokai may not want to see more of the world and do a little traveling?

Dark Waters, Hook, Line & Sinker

Hook: Rumors are spreading around town that small fishing boats are going missing at an alarming rate. It won't take to long before the press starts to cover the story.

Line: The harbor authorities will say it is just a fluke caused by unusual weather patterns and poor safety practices, leading to a short-term spike in lost ships. The families of the missing fishermen will not believe this and demand more actions be taken.

Sinker: The true problem is a boat of Funa-yurei have taken up residence in the outer harbor. They will continue to sink ships unless a way can be found to stop them.

Family Problems, Hook, Line & Sinker

Hook: A relative of one of the players has started to act strangely.

Line: She has been disappearing at night and coming back drunk. The thing is, she has always hated alcohol and before this,

never had a drop. They also had to get rid of the family dog as he kept trying to attack her.

Sinker: She has been possessed by a Kitsune and must receive an exorcism. It won't want to go easily and will try to escape any chance it gets.

Go away, Hook, Line & Sinker

Hook: The owner of a mountain Onsen (hot spring) needs help to save his business.

Line: Something is stopping anyone trying to get to his resort. The road is constantly being blocked by landslides and work crews are attacked. A few hikers in the area have also been assaulted and chased out of the area.

Sinker: A small group of Karasu-tengu have claimed the area as their own. They do not like trespassers and will fight to protect what they consider theirs. This will mean the end of the resort unless something can be worked out with them.

It must be mine, Hook, Line & Sinker

Hook: This adventure works best if the players are known to deal with the supernatural. They are approached by a lawyer with a proposal to earn a large sum of money.

Line: The lawyer is the intermediary for a collector. All he wants is for them to acquire a certain Yokai. The money being offered is very generous. All dealings though will only be through the lawyer, and under no circumstances will he meet the players.

Sinker: The Yokai he wants is a Tanuki that must be in good health. This will be very difficult as they are experts at shape-shifting, so it will not be easy to track one down. It will then have to be transported to the agreed drop-off point. If word gets out among other collectors the players may face attacks from other parties.

Missing Hiker, Hook, Line & Sinker

Hook: A hiker has gone missing in the local mountains. His family is desperate to find him and are offering a reward.

Line: He is in very good shape and knows the area very well, so the family is baffled by his disappearance. When asked why he was out that day, they will say it was for training. He is dedicated to being in the best shape possible and mastering the martial arts.

Sinker: When on his hike he came across a Hanadaka-tengu, and he actually tried to fight it but was easily beaten. The Tengu was impressed by his courage and took him further up in the mountains for some training. The training may last weeks or even months. The Tengu will not be happy with the players getting in the way of his work.

My House, Hook, Line & Sinker

Hook: Work on a new housing complex is getting ready to begin but there have been problems on the worksite.

Line: There is one last house on the property that has to be demolished but the construction equipment keeps getting sabotaged. They tried posting security at night but they said the place was haunted and the last guard was put in the hospital.

Sinker: With the attack on the last guard, no one will come near the place. The house is being protected by a Neko-mata. He was the pet cat of the former owner of the house. The owner was

a very kind woman who dearly loved all cats. A year ago, she passed away of old age and the Neko-mata has been guarding the house since.

Runaway, Hook, Line & Sinker

Hook: News stories start to appear on the Lazlo Society website about a strange monster being sighted in the Rocky Mountains (other mountain ranges can be used).

Line: A few grainy pictures are posted to the site. If the players know anything about Yokai they will recognize it as an Oni. At this point there are no reports of it hurting anyone, but how long will that last?

Sinker: The Oni was captured in Japan and sold to a collector in the US. In this case, the Oni has escaped and he wants it back no matter what. The Oni is confused and just wants to go home. To make the situation worse, the group that originally captured it, have been hired to get it back. The longer this goes on, the greater the chance of innocents getting hurt.

Stay away from the water, Hook, Line & Sinker

Hook: There have been a number of stories in the news of children drowning in the local river.

Line: The authorities are saying it is just a rash of horrible accidents. They are telling parents and schools to instruct children on proper water safety and not to go near the river without an adult.

Sinker: The authorities are also keeping it secret that the bodies of the children have been partly eaten. The real problem is a Kappa that has moved into the area. It will keep feeding on the local children till forced out of the area or forced into a promise not to attack anyone else.

Under dark skies, Hook, Line & Sinker

Hook: A plea for help is sent to the player group. It can come through the Lazlo Society or from a shrine the group has had dealings with.

Line: The call for help is from a businesswoman who is being troubled by horrible nightmares and growing health problems. All the tests run by the doctors cannot find any evidence of what is causing her problems. They have told her that if it is not stopped she could die.

Sinker: She was recently involved in a large real estate deal that made her some powerful enemies. To remove her from the picture, they have worked out a deal with a Nue to kill her. The Nue only comes near the house as a cloud, so figuring out what is going on will take some work.

Why did it have to be a snake?

Hook: A local paper that publishes articles on the paranormal has made a post to the Lazlo Society seeking help getting a picture.

Line: The picture they want is of a giant snake that is rumored to be seen in a nearby harbor. They will give decent money for the picture and cover travel expenses.

Sinker: The problem is the giant snake is a Nure-onna and is not likely to say “cheese.” The publicity from getting the picture could help the player group get more jobs in the future.

Conversion Notes for Rifts®

When transplanting any of these Japanese spirits and monsters to **Rifts®** (a few them already exist as different interpretations in **Rifts® Japan**), or any Mega-Damage setting, add Hit Points and S.D.C. together to determine the M.D.C. converting them point for point, and damage inflicted by these supernatural beings is M.D.



Aboard the Pearl

Optional Material for Dead Reign®

By Eric Sturm

The sailing ship, *Pearl*, rested on the water motionless, as the crew furlled the sails and rigging under the stern eye of Captain Dan Martin. A few years at sea had worn the vessel, but she was in better shape than she appeared at first glance. There was no polish on her brass, her sails were worn thin from repeated repairs, and claw marks pocked the fine wooden hull. Jury-rigged machine-gun mounts marred her beautiful lines, as did many bul-

let scars in the wood. The ropes and lines showed heavy bleaching from the sun.

“Shall we use the motor to enter the harbor, sir?” asked an eager mate as he wiped sweat from his eyes, squinting under the harsh sun.

“We wait till we get the signal,” Captain Martin replied as he looked to Doctor Morgan, the man with the powerful Zeus glasses to his face.

Ashore before them was a modern condo tower amid a marina which had served as a bastion of humanity for the last year. It was worn and battered, yachts and miscellaneous ships were half sunk and burned, the tower showed smoke damage on its sides and storm damage all around.

Flotsam and jetsam filled the docks, and even at this distance, a low, tortured, hungry moan could be heard softly from within the junk piles along the shore. The debris covered once manicured lawns and streets. The bait shop and coffee shops now hosted broken windows, weeds, zombies and wild critters.

The lack of vibrancy in the building was not alarming, as discretion is a necessity of any survivor encampment. The lack of response, though, was worrying.

“We’re on schedule, they are expecting us and there is no way they could miss us out here,” Martin stated. He made no mention of noticing the settlement’s boats were not in their usual areas.

“I have movement now... figures shuffling... Damn it! The zombies have taken them. No evidence of survivors,” the Doctor said flatly, trying to disguise his disappointment and anger. Looking to Martin, he continued, “I was needing their oranges for our next trading stop, guess we have to think of something else now.”

Martin’s eyes showed how tired he was, but his voice carried resolve.

“We will rest here for the night, and post a watch on the condo. Perhaps we’ll still find survivors. In the morning we’ll plan for scavenging with that the scouts report.” He turned to the eager mate. “We have lost settlements before. We continue on mission, we rescue, bring supplies and trade, and we rebuild. Like always.”

The mate never took his eyes off the shore of the dead world, but sighed. “I hope Diane didn’t suffer,” he said to himself as he returned to his duties.

History of the Pearl

The *Pearl* was built for comfort in order to carry vacationers on adventures at sea and along exotic tropical coastlines under

the sails and stars. Fun times to be talked about at the next cocktail party or conference. Fun at see the way the pirates and sailors of old did it. Launched in 2004 to appear as a historical replica, but to modern specifications, complete with motor-powered travel, the Pearl sailed the waters out of Charleston, South Carolina and down the coast into Mexico and Central America, and back countless times.

Her destiny changed with the coming of The Wave in 2012. Many of the crew fell to zombies rising up on board and attacking crew and passengers. When the bloody fighting came to an end, the captain, the officers, half of the crew and two-thirds of the passengers had met with a terrible fate. One of the passengers, Dan Martin, a former naval officer aboard stepped up to offer his skills and experience and soon assumed the role of ship's captain.

The young cook fell to the dead first. He opened the freezer to discover the racket he was hearing was the herald of the new rulers of the world, dead and hungry. What came next was not a battle but a feast. Two passengers had gotten sick and died. Nobody expected them to rise from the dead, hungry for the living. As the two killed other people, the dead soon rose to kill more, and create more of the risen dead. Room by room, the zombie methodically went from meal to meal, anyone opening a door likely to become their next victim. When the screaming started, people panicked, which didn't help matters any. Mothers plunged steak knives into cold flesh to protect their children, fathers bludgeoned and beat zombies with fists and deck chairs. The carnage and terror was horrific.

The last few of the living were huddled in the engineering department, Dan Martin and a handful of crewmen stood their defiant last stand before it. As the dead violently broke in, an aging grandfather charged to meet them, thrusting a length of broken pipe before him to protect his family. Arthritis affected his aim, his knee faltered and the pipe drove up into and below the chin of a vile creature. The creature's momentum and hunger drove it further, thrusting the pipe into its head. To the amazement of the defenders the creature died, it ceased to move. "Hit 'em in the head" became a rallying war cry. Martin used shears to take the next head and the battle now could and would be won.

The ship silently glided past burning cities, the radio carried screams for help or sermons on the end of the world. Before the TV and radio transmissions stopped, they spoke only of death and doom around the world. The Pearl became a refugee ship, dirty, smelly, desperate, starving, hopelessly seeking safe port, civilization and leadership.

Running the ship became not just survival for those on board, but survival for people still on shore. It took a visionary, like survivor *Dan Martin* and *Nicholas Morgan* to make the crew and the survivors they had collected realize that they represented hope. That their ship was a beacon of civilization and safety. That instead of seeking leadership out of the horror, they could provide it.

The plan was simple: Gather up other survivors, help establish safe havens along the coast, and then become a provider of vital supplies. Both Martin and Morgan realized that their ship could quickly become a life line for the struggling remains of humanity.

Martin found a crew needing vision and purpose with a leader who had deep commitment to honor and service the living. The crew had the need, the captain had the strength, and now Martin provided the additional vision and logistical planning. Their

mission gave them and everyone purpose in the aftermath of the Apocalypse.

Quickly, the people aboard the ship became energized with purpose and the whispered promise of hope. The crew snapped out of their daze into focused action, dedicated to providing aid, rescue and supplies to survivors up and down the coast. They would bring with them news of other coastal survivors, work to help supply them, and whenever possible, save lives.

When malaria broke out in the St. Augustine Fort they scavenged and found the drugs to stop it. When the Miami Condo Haven had the fresh fruit available the crew of the Pearl would exchange other supplies and carry the fruit to Fort Morrow and other survivor camps. And whenever feasible, without putting the ship and crew at serious risk, or being tricked and overruled by pirates or gangs along the coast, they would venture ever deeper into the ruins of human civilization to rescue the living (humans and livestock), gather supplies and carry to them survivor camps on the coast and various islands. When out matched at sea, they would try to run, or fend off brigands with trade. A valuable resource, the Pearl – so far – has been spared by pirates and militant groups in exchange for news and supplies. The price of travel in the world of the dead.

Non-Player Characters of the Pearl

Captain Daniel Martin

As a young man Dan studied Nuclear Engineering at the US Naval Academy, and served for several years in the submarine fleet. Upon leaving the Navy he worked as the Human Resources Manager for a defense contractor, and was happy. His vacation cruise aboard the Pearl was cut short by The Wave. The ship was held at sea for quarantine when the dead began to rise and kill on the mainland. On ship, there were only two zombies to initially rise, but they decimated the passengers and crew.

Dan lead the battle to secure the ship and emerged bloody but victorious. He lost his wife in the fight, and his family on land is almost assuredly gone.

Upon seeing the end of the world, the 54 year old Navy vet did his duty, but was losing heart and purpose. Dan's meeting Doctor Morgan gave him renewed hope and the higher purpose of saving lives and trying to save and rebuild a small corner of civilization. He has found purpose as the leader of the remaining ship's crew, all of whom agree upon the noble mission to find and rescue survivors.

Nicholas Morgan, Trade Master

Born in the Philippines, Nicholas earned his citizenship and his college tuition by serving in the US Army as a simple infantryman. Hard work in college and earnestness in life has achieved everything he set out to accomplish: A PhD in economics, a position as a tenured professor of economics, author of four books, and a life as of study and travel. He was at his waterfront home when the Wave hit and the dead rose. Seeing the Pearl come into port he saw it as a potential place of safety and a resource to rescue other survivors. He sold Dan Martin on the idea of using the

Pearl as a trading vessel to assist in the creation and stabilization of waterfront survivor communities. The 58 year old intellectual is skilled at logistics and planning, and has decided to dedicate himself to saving lives and creating a chain of coastline safe haven communities and a flotilla of rescue ships and ship based havens.

First Mate Matt Gerber

Matt was 10 years into his service in the Marine Corps, a specialist in reconnaissance, when the Wave hit and the dead rose. Home on leave, he tried to fight his way back to back to rejoin his unit. A Herculean feat that he accomplished, only to find the base overrun with zombies. He grabbed what gear and ammunition he could, including eight assault rifles and 6,000 rounds of ammunition, before working his way down the coast. He arrived on the Pearl to the complete surprise of the captain, he had swam out, boarded her and took two sandwiches and beers from the galley before making his way to the captain's quarters before anyone realized he had boarded their vessel. After handing one of the beers to the astonished Captain Dan, he politely requested permission to join the crew. He also had his gear, ammo and five others survivors back on shore. All have become members of the crew.

Ryan has risen to the position of First Mate and head of security. He still trains and leads men of the shore parties. He also interviews anyone asking to join the crew. A natural leader, Ryan is the strong quiet type, intelligent, observant and always planning ahead. He helps manage the crew well and always has his shore teams sharp and ready for anything.

Officer Ryan Cooper

When the world ended, Ryan was a young playboy-type wasting away his trust fund as best he could. His athletic build, yachting and sailing skills and paintball shooting swapped out for handguns with live ammo (he has a pair of 10mm pistols on him at all times), has made him a surprisingly handy addition to the crew. Despite his commitment to the pleasures life has to offer, Ryan is an idealist who tries to do the right thing. He has a strong empathy for others and truly cares about rescuing people. He encountered one of the Pearl's first shore parties, saved them from peril and has earned their trust. He is known for keeping high-end coffee beans and his own coffee press in his quarters on ship, and still has an eye out for luxury items. The crew tease him about this but they trust and respect him. Ryan also has his own, private yacht nearby as an emergency backup ship and for scouting missions. The yacht is excellent for slipping into areas for reconnaissance and supply gathering missions.

Life Aboard Ship

No one is simply a passenger aboard the Pearl. There are a multitude of tasks needed to keep the ship operational and support its mission of rescue and supplying survivors. As a result, skilled and unskilled labor is always in demand in all positions. Radio operations, cooking, cleaning, maintenance, standing watch, and so forth. Any character allowed to join the ship

works a 12 hour day and may be assigned to stand a four hour watch. Everyone is expected to apply their skills and muscle to the best of their abilities. Those who slack-off risk being put off-ship onto shore and left to their own devices. There are regular drills for man overboard, damage control, battle stations, fire, and zombie outbreak. ALL crewmembers gather for morning quarters on deck.

Following orders and cooperation are demanded to be absolute and immediate. When you board the Pearl you accept her way of life and the authority of the officers. They are not cruel but will not tolerate theft, rape, sloth, poor hygiene, sloppiness or anything that hurts the ship. They rule fairly, they respect the crew but if you are not contributing to the ship and mission, there is no place for you aboard.

Yet the soft side to living aboard is safe, clean running water, electricity, heating and air-conditioning, safety from the dead, and food. Characters will eat in the mess, draw clothing from stores, and have basic medical services tended to. The crew even receives a share of the profits from scavenging and trading, though the size of your share depends upon your position. It is a far cry living on the edge, fearful and hungry ashore.

Statistics of the Pearl

A large Corsair Cutter, small, fast with large cargo areas and extremely seaworthy.

Crew: 12 plus 6 craftsmen and 20-30 passengers (minimum of three crew to operate).

Size: 80 feet (24.4 m) length overall, 20 feet (6.1 m) wide.

S.D.C. by Location

Front Mast – 45

Main Mast – 256

Sails (5) – 35 each

Front Section – 600

Rudder – 110

Mid-ship Area – 450

Rear Section – 500

Hull per 10 feet (3 m) square area – 180

Keel per 10 feet (3 m) square area – 280

Maximum Speed: Under sail 16 mph (25.6 km); motor driven 8 mph (12.8 km).

Cargo Capacity: 30 tons.

Armaments: Fitted with 10 M2HB heavy machine-guns – 3 to port, 3 to starboard, two astern and two forward.

Equipment of Note: Osmosis water maker, large water tanks, 400HP Caterpillar engine with 2,000 gallon (7,570 liters) fuel tank, two 50kw electric generators, 2 long-range radios 2 loran navigation devices, electric galley, freeze storage, radar, sonar, depth finder, heavy sewing machines, small machine shop, 2 air compressors and 12 sets of scuba gear, and a medical bay. Since the end of the world, the crew has added a distillery (which can fuel the engines) and a well provisioned armory.

The armory is well stocked with 60,000 of rounds for the machine-guns, and hundreds of rounds for each of the 9 shot-guns, 6 assault rifles, two sniper rifles, and 15 pistols, as well as a good selection of melee weapons.

The Galley is stocked enough to keep the ship at sea for at least four weeks.

The Pearl in Your Game

The Pearl can be an excellent *deus ex machina* plot device to pull your characters out of a bad situation, easily introduced as a sailing vessel close to shore, is spotted and immediately approached as a potential resource, safe haven or way to get away from zombies on shore. She can also be used as a means to transport survivors to new, presumably safer locations. As a sailing vessel, it can travel silently, but those white sails are going to be seen from a distance and makes the vessel a potential target for bad and desperate people. Approaching shore should always be done with great caution. Staying away from shore and using smaller tenders (with motors and paddles), is probably the smart way to go.

I don't recommend the player characters be given control of the Pearl, even if they have sailing skills. However that is up to the Game Master. Of course, they should have input on its operations and keeping it safe, as well as the player group being sent out to scavenger supplies, to search for survivors, rescue missions and other operations.

Challenges of Life at Sea

Any vessel requires regular maintenance and repair, and while a sailing ship is low-tech, its operations are not easy and demands constant attention to be kept operational and in "ship shape." An old saying among sailors is "at sea you only have what you bring with you." That includes your own abilities and commitment to the ship and crew.

The salt air and sun is corrosive to materials including metal, while storms damage can happen, not just to the sails and rigging, but to the hull and rudder, as well as crewmen who may become sick from the rough motion of the sea or get washed overboard. The crew of the Pearl regularly need to find new ropes, canvas, sewing supplies, and machined parts, even basic raw materials to work from like wood need to be procured. The storage of the consumables, including food and toiletries is limited. Ship repairs cannot be done in a dockyard, and the modern forecasting of storms is lost.

Food and nutritional concerns are always an issue. The term limey for British sailors came from their eating of limes upon coming to port. At sea fresh fruit could not be stored for a long period as this was before refrigeration and canning. Scurvy and vitamin deficiencies were common maladies among the sailors and eating lime and other citrus fruits was a quick and appropriate way to replenish nutritional requirements for good health.

Sailors and pirates of old would plant fresh fruit and release pigs upon uninhabited islands, and some say the word *Buccaneer* comes from this, the term meaning or derived from "bacon eater" due to the dependency on pigs for meat. In the world of the dead, having access to safe supplies of food and water like this will be critical yet, in some ways, more difficult than it was hundreds of years ago. Creating food and supply caches and letting livestock loose on uninhabited islands remains a very good plan.

Medical care. Bandages, pain killers, antibiotics and other basic medical supplies are a necessity. Without hospitals, doctors and pharmacies, a simple cut or wound that is not cleaned and cared for can quickly turn into an infection and result in loss of limb or death! Getting and keeping medical supplies (more secret caches?) is important to all survivors.

Boat Specifications

Note: For those of you who have it, see the **Palladium Fantasy® Sourcebook: Adventures on the High Seas**, for more complete stats on a variety of *old-style sailing vessels*. Of course, those types of sailing ships are comparatively few in the modern world.

Sailing Schooner

Length: 100-120 feet (30.5 to 36.6 m). Maximum Speed: 12 mph (19 km). Pass/crew: 8 officers and 20-40 crew and 30-40 passengers S.D.C. 1,200-1,600 A.R. 10.

Sailing Brigantine

Length: 100-140 feet (30.5 to 42.6 m). Maximum Speed: 20 mph (32 km). Pass/crew: 12 officers, 30-40 crew and 50-70 passengers S.D.C. 1,800-1,200. A.R. 11.

Sailing Frigate

Length: 150-200 feet (45.7 to 61 m). Maximum Speed: 16 mph (25.6 km). Pass/crew 12 officers, 40-60 crew, and 50-70 passengers S.D.C. 2,000-2,400. A.R. 11.

Sailing Cutter

Length: 180-240 feet (55 to 73 m). Maximum Speed: 20 mph (32 km) under sail, 10 mph (16 km) under engine. Pass/crew: 12 officers, 50 crew members, and 150 passengers. S.D.C.: 2,100-2,400. A.R. 11.

Small Fishing Boat

Length: 24-40 feet (7.3 to 12.2 km). Maximum Speed: 7 mph (11.2 km) under sail, 12 mph (19 km) motor. Pass/crew: 3-10 crew members. S.D.C.: 180-240. A.R. 7.

Large Fishing Boat

Length: 60-120 feet (18.3 to 36.6 m). Maximum Speed: 10 mph (16 km) under sail, 15 mph (24 km) motor. Pass/crew: 15-50 crew members. S.D.C.: 420-540. A.R. 9.

Navy Patrol Boat

Length: 80-100 feet (24.4 to 30.5 m). Maximum Speed: 42 mph (67.2 km) motor. Pass/crew: 20 officers and 12-20 crew members. S.D.C. 3,600-4,200. A.R. 13.

Armaments vary by class but typically involve 2-4 machine-gun mounts with grenade launchers. Larger vessels may have one light auto-cannon mounted in a turret.

Coast Guard Cutter

Length: 300-320 feet (91.5 to 97.5 m). Maximum Speed: 30-40 mph (48 to 64 km). Pass/crew: 10-14 officers and 100-150 crew members. S.D.C. 3,000-3,600. A.R. 14.

Armaments vary by class but typically involve multiple machine-gun mounts with grenade launchers, a missile launch system and a medium auto-cannon in an armored turret.

Navy Frigate

Length: 400-500 feet (122 to 152 m). Maximum Speed: 35 mph (56 km) motor. Pass/crew: 10-12 officers and 120-150 crew members. S.D.C. 4,500-6,000 A.R. 16.

Armaments vary by class but typically involve multiple machine-gun mounts with grenade launchers, a pair of missile launch systems and 2-4 medium auto-cannon in an armored turret.



On a Wing and a Prayer

A Ninjas & Superspies™ Adventure

By Paul Herbert

Adventure Note (contains spoilers): This adventure is based for any number of characters as it is easily molded to suit. It was originally intended for 5-6 first level characters so boss fights may prove difficult, the fewer player characters there are. It is written only using N&S and does not include any source material from *Mystic China*. The plot and various scenarios incorporate much from the world of Hollywood spies as well as ancient martial arts culture. Therefore, any and every O.C.C. will have their moment(s). These scenarios are also embellished with as much humor, fun and action as the inspirations they grew from. “On a Wing & a Prayer” sees the joining of the military with the spiritual in a diabolical (but semi-original) scheme for revenge! It is also meant to be the catalyst for a campaign of adventures as the players can attempt to “take down” any remaining investors of SPECTRUM!

There are a lot of NPCs in this adventure and I recommend reading their profile as soon as they are mentioned for the first time. It will make sense of some of the plot actions that they take, especially in the first few scenarios when you (the reader) don’t really know them yet.

Chapters:

1. Prologue.
2. Waiting in the Wings.
3. Free as a Bird.
4. Flying Without Wings.
5. Birds of a Feather.
6. Stool Pigeons.
7. Foul One’s Own Nest.
8. Canary in a *Neodymium* Mine.
9. Taken Under Their Wing.
10. Bird’s Eye View.
11. Home to Roost.
12. The Crow’s Nest.
13. Coup de Grace.
14. The Nightingale.
15. Epilogue.
 - NPCs.
 - Delta Force Team.
 - *Spectrum* Investors.

1. Prologue

The players should be a cooperative group. Either friends or colleagues from the same spy agency are the best options. As mentioned, there is something for every O.C.C. but that does not mean that a specific O.C.C. is required. In fact, the skill selection can be as random and as personal as the players (or G.M.) like. Not having certain skills may make various encounters more difficult but all objectives can be accomplished, but they’ll just be harder (or more fun)! That’s one of the beauties of role-playing.

The initial story begins in the Australian city of Sydney, so in the original playtest (which I’ll refer to some details about throughout this adventure), I began the group as a selected mission team as they were all under the employment of the same agency (with potential freelance options). Their mission was to investigate and report on the criminal underworld of Mr. Nate Bailey (a.k.a. The Tasmanian Devil), a known blackmailer with intelligence on several powerful diplomats and high-ranking military officers from multiple nations. The scenario began with the team having infiltrated an underground, “no holds-barred,” bare-knuckle fighting contest run by Bailey and his bodyguard (and current champion) Vinnie Vango. All of those player characters with some form of martial arts found themselves in an abandoned Sydney car lot in the opening moments of a last man standing brawl for tournament supremacy (and \$200K)! Surrounded by a ring of the finest cars and high stakes gamblers dressed in tuxedos and little black dresses, the bell rings. Let the battle commence! This scenario allowed the new players (& G.M.) to get used to fighting (each other that is, plus one NPC for each character) and using their various moves, as well as having some fun and creating some macho competition between the characters that just got better throughout the rest of the adventure! It also introduced two of the *Spectrum* investors who will appear later and gave some personality to these NPCs as well as a personal vendetta.

Whatever opener you choose, the team leader will get a communication (a phone call or secret drop) that they are to immediately head to the Sydney Opera House as there is reason to believe that a Brigadier General in the U.S. Air Force named Anthony Roth, who is in attendance at tonight’s opera of *Tosca* (by Verdi), could be in serious danger. Unfortunately, this intelligence, although reliable, holds no other details...

G.M.s – secret notes as handouts are a great way to bring across the spy/secretcy aspect of Ninjas & superspies and I thoroughly recommend handing the group this mission as a note or even as a recorded message! In the playtest I recorded a voicemail message from SARA (Secret Agent Relations Administrator) onto my cell phone and placed it in an envelope. The players placed a bet on the fight and I handed the envelope to them as their winnings. Within the envelope was the phone displaying a new voicemail message for them to listen to. The message said:

“Greetings, Special Agents.

“You are assigned an overriding mission with immediate effect. Brigadier General Anthony Roth of the U.S. Air Force is currently attending tonight’s performance of Verdi’s Tosca at the Sydney Opera House. We have credible intelligence that the Brigadier General is in imminent danger. Unfortunately, we know little else. You are redirected to the Brigadier General’s protection. Get over there immediately; the assailants may already be waiting in the wings.

“This recording is to be destroyed immediately.”

I then recorded voicemail messages from SARA for all updates from their agency and whilst one player went to the bathroom I would slip the phone into his jacket pocket, or in the drawer with the bottle opener, a box of beer, cigarette packet, etc. And when he noticed, he got the update!

2. Waiting in the Wings

Whatever mode of transport (public or private), the player characters should head straight over to the Sydney Opera House. There are plenty of pictures and schematics of the Opera House on the internet. I found it useful to have an overview of the outside area, and a plan of the interior, as well as a cutaway side view. All of these can be found with a common search engine. G.M.s are encouraged to allow the players to purchase tickets to the opera at this last minute (over the phone whilst traveling?). But only allow a box seat available so that they get to see across the auditorium to witness what happens.

Unknown to the player characters, the Brigadier General, accompanied by two obvious military bodyguards, is attending the opera to meet with a new contact. An international real estate mogul named Richard Lang. Lang will only speak with the Brigadier General and only in person. Lang claims to have some important information on a U.S. illegal arms dealer (Duke Williams?) that he is willing to provide to the U.S. military. As the players arrive, Roth is already waiting in a private box with his two guards. Lang will enter the box with his own bodyguard (Talon, with one finger already missing). The two men greet each other and Roth offers Lang his seat. As Richard Lang unfolds the seat, he notices a flower (a Mui-Fa flower to be precise) hidden on the seat. Lang picks up the flower, at which point he is shot in the chest from across the auditorium (silently) and falls back across the box! The two soldiers cover the general and flee the box with him, leaving Lang and Talon ducking for cover. The Mui-Fa assassin is Lance Hollister, positioned in another box, hopefully on the same side of the auditorium as the players witnessing this. His escape route is to the roof of the building whereby he will winch down to the external grounds and escape via a waiting speedboat. A chase should ensue and a climatic rooftop fight is suggested. Hollister has Bok Pai and a good sense of balance, so it'll be a tough fight.

That is not the only plot occurring at the Sydney Opera House this night however. Lang's story is just a ruse (see the background detail about Richard Lang). Part of this ruse is to not only be up close to Roth but to actually kidnap him! Of course, being nearly assassinated has impeded this scheme so the Brigadier General was actually saved today by Hollister, not the player characters. Several of the Wang-Gar clan are on site waiting with a van in the lower ground level storage areas as well as in prominent positions around the opera house. These martial artists may be encountered at any time by the player characters and will give chase to Hollister once the assassination is attempted. If the player characters see the Mui-Fa assassin fighting with masked clan members it will add more questions to this new mystery. Lang was wearing a bulletproof vest and survived the gunshot. Talon will take him to the van and will use another finger section to blow the cargo doors and escape (with any remaining clan members). Remember, clan members will all commit suicide rather than be captured and interrogated.

Any delays in their arrival will mean that the scenario is over by the time they arrive and they will have missed an opportunity to gain the general's favor as well as following some potential leads. If they are late on the scene then the Brigadier General and Australian police force will have contained the scene. This means that the characters may never know what happened or that Lang was even present.

In the playtest, the group made an interesting assumption that whoever picked up the flower was the target but remained sure that it was simply a mishap that it was not the Brigadier General who picked it up.

There are a lot of questions to be answered and depending on their relationship (if any) with the Brigadier General or with their Spy Agency's foreign relations, they may get a lot or very little in the way of answers.

3. Free as a Bird

The story proceeds six months later. G.M.s can conduct another adventure in between should they want to level the characters first or the players have an opportunity to select a different character if not happy with their current one. The player characters will be pulled in for a briefing. Either the head of their spy agency, contact or secret message will relay the following brief:

"Greetings, Special Agents.

"Approximately six months ago, you may recall you were pulled from detail to protect Brigadier General Anthony Roth from a believed assassination. Any further details of this mission were withheld from you on a need to know basis. Well, the time has come that you now need to know.

"Just an hour before we assigned you to Roth, we learnt that his counterpart position in the United Kingdom had disappeared. Commodore Lawrence Mathis was aboard a small private airplane on his way to Washington allegedly to meet with Roth. Upon the deactivation of the Commodore's black box recorder, we began our investigation. Learning of the Brigadier General's foreign whereabouts, we took necessary precautions to protect him. We know nothing about the reasoning behind his sudden trip but his staff mentioned Mathis receiving a letter just before his urgent departure. We have yet to locate this letter but believe it may be hidden somewhere in his home. Only two people know the full layout of that house, Commodore Mathis and his daughter, Camille Ova Mathis. Unfortunately, Miss Mathis has been impossible to contact as she has spent the last 15 years in a maximum security, Chinese military prison. Well, last month she was released but hasn't been seen since. Yesterday however, we discovered some new, key information. Camille had had no visitors in all those years except in the last six months, whereby she had been visited several times by real estate mogul, Richard Lang. We do not know how he got access to her when we could not but it was he who negotiated her release. We believe wherever he is, Camille will be with him. Luckily for us, this weekend we know exactly where he is as he's hosting a charity surfing competition in Santa Cruz, CA. The Commodore is still MIA. Locate Camille Mathis and get her to help you locate that letter.

"This recording is to be destroyed immediately."

There is more background information that the players' spy agency may be willing to release. This information should only be released if the players ask for it (or are struggling with the plot). Below are some bullet points on the mentioned characters:

Commodore Lawrence Mathis

- Good friends with Brigadier General Roth throughout both their entire careers.

- Both officers share a love of racing pigeons, which elevated their friendship beyond just professional to spending family vacations together.
- Has the power and connections to have instigated his daughter's release from prison but was publicly ashamed of his daughter's actions.

Camille Ova Mathis

- Professional thief.
- Stole unknown information on Chinese military.
- Released a week after her cellmate was killed.
- Her cellmate was a weird, old Chinese lady and White Jade Fan master.

Richard Lang

- American (I made this alter ego from my home country for ease of play).
- New money (within the last 3 years).
- Clientele includes sheiks, royalty and other business tycoons.
- Has properties in New York, Washington, London, Beijing and Santa Cruz (**G.M. Note/Spoiler:** This is NOT Santa Cruz, CA, but on Flores, Azores, which is to be revealed later!).

With the additional background details I began sending to the players via emails, in which I had changed the text color to white (on a white background). I resisted telling them what I was sending and kept sending more emails. Eventually, they highlighted the text and got the information they sought!

4. Flying Without Wings

Richard Lang is indeed hosting a three day (and two night) charity event in Santa Cruz, California this weekend for the American Bird Conservation Society (ABC). The event includes a surfing competition (Saturday & Sunday daytime), high stakes raffle (Friday night), silent auction (all weekend with the highest bidders announced at Sunday dinner), casino (all weekend) and black tie dinner (Sunday evening). Lang has booked an entire hotel named the "Waterfront" (fictional), a five star hotel with all modern conveniences and not surprisingly, adjacent to its namesake. The hotel and beachfront are crowded. The event is a busy one and the invitees bring large entourages with them. It will be easy for professionals to walk around unobstructed so long as they look the part. Lang, his associates and the hotel themselves, all have security personnel positioned about the complex. However, each security detail has its own objectives and generally, security will predominantly be a reactive force.

During the weekend, Richard Lang will be busy hosting but the player characters may have an opportunity to speak with him either at the Friday night cocktail party and raffle or at Sunday's dinner party (or elsewhere if the G.M. decides). He is always accompanied by Talon (now with two fingers missing) and his "financial broker," Liwei Chao (actually keeping tabs on Lang on behalf of the Wang-Gar clan). Lang will deny that Camille is with him and claim that he used his contacts to get her released as she was his childhood sweetheart (true). If questioned about his meeting with Brigadier General Roth he will say that he had some important information to pass on to the U.S. military and Camille suggested that her old family friend was the only person

who could be trusted (remember, Camille was disowned by her father so she couldn't recommend him).

At some point throughout the weekend, the players should notice on one of the balconies or in a crowd, an elderly Asian woman whose features are partially obscured by an elaborate fan. She is clearly watching the player characters and will make eye contact before disappearing into the crowd. She will not speak to the player characters or reply if spoken to by them. Camille Mathis is at the hotel but will remain reclusive in her room throughout the entire weekend. Her room is located on the top floor and she regularly orders room service. Players may well see the bellboys fighting over who will deliver the entrées to the beauty on the top floor this time around!

Duke Williams (a.k.a. Mr. Red) has brought with him his own entertainment for the casino. A mechanical bucking bronco which has been placed in the casino reception foyer, a beautiful marble-pillared room framed by internal balconies surrounding a spiral staircase to all floors. In the early hours of Sunday morning (Saturday night), one of the investors has kidnapped Camille Mathis and has her tied to the bucking bronco (I chose Chester Middleton as I wanted the players to see his Rolls Royce fly off the Santa Cruz pier)! His bodyguard is at the controls and they begin to spin it on maximum speed to torment Camille before they kill her. In her role as an espionage thief, Camille Mathis stole some important information regarding her kidnapper. Now they want their revenge! What information this was is up to the G.M. and may lead to a side plot or sequel perhaps? The player characters will discover this just in time to save Camille. If they are not awake then have them be suddenly awoken by an unknown sound (created by Lang) to find that their room door is wide open. When they walk out into the corridor to investigate, they will hear a distant scream in the foyer below. Both the investor and his bodyguard can be killed or captured at this point. Do not hold back on the players. Camille will be extremely grateful and will agree to help them in their search for the missing letter. She will confirm that there is indeed a secret study in her former family home in London. But, she will not reveal its location to them. Knowing that this may be the last time she may get to visit the place she grew up in, the nostalgic Camille will agree only to take them to it. Camille will also be able to answer some questions and convince the players that Lang is indeed an informant for the Brigadier and "one of the good guys." She claims to know nothing about an Asian lady with a fan.

G.M.s, have some fun with the charity event, casino, dinner and silent auctions. It is an opportunity to play out some of your favorite cliché moments from the films.

In the original playtest, I had Vinnie Vango reappear as an antagonist out on the waves (who better than the original Australian surfer dude). That's right, a melee fight whilst balancing on surfboards! Only in **Ninjas & Superspies™**!

The players also had no additional information from the Sydney Opera House scenario in relation to Roth or Lang! So I introduced another character working on behalf of the Brigadier General to investigate Lang further, a female Wired Agent named Rachel Murphy (undercover of course), poised ready to emerge from the ocean's waters in true film fashion.

Another lesson learnt was to not draw out these days if there is no action. Role-playing meeting several hundred guests is boring. Do not be afraid to reveal the interesting characters quickly (this

is something I still struggle with today). The characters' espionage experience is sure to identify these characters anyway, so keep the flow moving.

5. Birds of a Feather

As if all of the above weren't enough mystery and action for one weekend, there is another encounter for the player characters. Although this scenario will respond better to more spying and less engaging. Richard Lang has summoned forth seven global crime lords, one from each continent, to invest in a deviant scheme that will inevitably see a profitable return for their financial aid as well as their criminal expertise. Each investor is referred to only by a color of the rainbow (e.g. Mr. Yellow) to keep their identity hidden and each has his own area of proficiency in the criminal underworld. Individually they are the rulers of their trade, but together this force makes a truly formidable international foe, with the power and influence to topple governments!

Richard Lang will meet with each investor privately at some point over the weekend to finalize their investment and transfer their funds. The player characters may spy on one (or all) of these meetings although the details of what the money is for and how much are never disclosed verbally. Whichever investor you use to kidnap Camille, plan that meeting to occur beforehand. If the players are canny they will take photos of these investors and may receive some basic info on the identity of these "businessmen" and their protectors. It is good to put some names to "Mr. Blue" etc. and build the tension of how deadly these rogues may be. But as the team is waiting on their spy agencies to do the investigation, it is up to the G.M. when he (the spy agency) reveals these identities. Mysteriously, there seems to be no "Mr. Violet"...

Players will always do things you don't expect. For example, my playtesters broke into Camille's room prematurely, only to find the Asian fan lady in there. She discovered them and they fled. They also spent some time investigating who was bidding on the items for the silent auction as if it was some sort of a transaction or deal – a lead I was happy for them to follow and may even elaborate on in any potential sequels!

6. Stool Pigeons

The Commodore's home is a stately affair with large grounds, numerous bedrooms and an antique English decor. If the characters' spy agencies have enough influence they may be able to look around with little trouble, otherwise the players may need some subterfuge. Up on the roof, the Commodore keeps a pigeon coop with some sorely in need of care pigeons still currently there. Camille can reveal that both her father and Brigadier General Roth are keen pigeon fanciers and it is one of the interests that kept them close friends throughout the years. Through a secret door on the other side of the pigeon coop is a small study containing an old oak desk and chair with one bookcase housing books on topics such as war strategy, aircraft and of course, pigeon racing. On another wall are several photos of similar subjects as well as an old group photo of Mathis, Camille, Roth and Roth's son when the children were young, at the site of their first meeting, the Smithsonian museum in Washington D.C.

Camille will go in first and look around the desk (**G.M. Note/Spoiler:** She will actually pocket a flash drive containing the op-

erating codes for the E.M.P.E.R.O.R. satellite in one of her chest compartments). The players should find the letter they are looking for still half in its envelope. It reads:

"Cher Ami,

"I have done it! I have located my old adversaries, but I am in desperate need of your aid! I cannot say more at this time. Please meet me at our initial place of meeting, posthaste. Secrecy is of the utmost importance!"

"Your trusted friend,

"B.G. A.R. Sr."

Any characters who can speak French will know that the greeting should grammatically read "Mon cher ami," and any research done into "Cher Ami" will reveal a famous pigeon and war hero with an exhibit in the Smithsonian museum (G.M.s, look it up yourself). Any analysis of the letter's handwriting will reveal that it is a forgery but it has some incredible workmanship to it. It may be possible that it was actually written by the Brigadier but his writing ability or mental state might have been impaired or himself under duress at the time of writing. It has that natural flow to it that is almost impossible to fake (**G.M. Note/Spoiler:** It was written by Tony Roth who has inherited his father's handwriting style). On the envelope is an obvious fingerprint in blue chalk. Analysis of the fingerprint will reveal it belongs to a wanted Chinese smuggler/trafficker named Minsheng Qianfan. Minsheng operates (and owns) a pool hall in the seedier back streets of Beijing. Camille will ask to come with them although that decision is up to the response of the player characters.

My playtest group had enough pull to get in undisturbed and I needed to speed up the plot with minimal research involved. That didn't work out too well, as the players found the Cher Ami clue and made their next destination the Smithsonian museum which was a total dead end. It could have been an opportunity to meet with the Brigadier if your group is on good terms with him, or even Rachel Murphy if you've introduced that NPC (or an alternative). If Camille is privy to the players' strategies, she may plan an ambush at their next stop.

For the letter, I suggest actually writing it out, putting it half in an open envelope and handing it to the players. Even get some blue chalk and smudge a fingerprint on it to see if they notice. Little props like this go a long way to player investment.

7. Foul One's Own Nest

These back-street Chinese pool halls tend to be poorly maintained, long rooms with just a shutter door opened onto the street. They can number in the dozens on the same street. Minsheng's establishment is easy to locate and the smuggler is present in his pool hall in a VIP area in the back of the building, lit only by the light above the tables. Surrounded by a small entourage of pretty girls and a gang of pool-playing goons, the players will have to be the best negotiators to get any information out of Minsheng without a fight. He is a cocky, arrogant, dishonorable sleazebag who will spill any information he has to protect himself (if he is alone and starts taking Hit Point damage, he will attempt to barter for his life or freedom).

All he knows about the letter to the Commodore is that he has regular dealings with the notorious "Wang Gar clan" as he provides them with otherwise unobtainable "merchandise." This miscreant cutthroat actually deals in human trafficking and

slaves! On his last meeting, he was arranging the importation of 50 fresh, healthy refugees to toil in an unregistered mine in a location in the middle of nowhere in central China. Minsheng will give the characters the location without hesitation. They are mining Neodymium (used in magnets) but for what purpose, he does not know other than a name he overheard, “Operation: As the Crow Flies.” His contact is the mine foreman, a man named Fachu Shengyin. On his last visit over six months ago, Fachu handed Minsheng the letter and told him to have it delivered to the Commodore’s home.

Before Minsheng can give any more information (not that he has much more to tell), a metallic jade fan will strike him in the forehead, killing him instantly. At the entrance is the mysterious Jade Fan Lady. She runs and unless the players are incredibly quick, she will get into her car and flee. If Camille is outside then the characters will hear Camille’s scream from inside her car. A nighttime car chase around Beijing should ensue, and if Camille is rescued then the characters will be at a loss as to how the Jade Fan Lady disappeared. If you haven’t introduced Chester Middleton’s souped-up, flying Rolls Royce yet, then this is the perfect opportunity to demonstrate its flying capabilities and have Camille kidnapped.

The moment that the player characters begin to investigate the Wang Gar clan, Brigadier General Roth (or his agents) will be alerted. Depending on the characters’ relationship with him, they will probably discover the background story of Tony Roth Junior and his Delta Force team’s failed mission to rescue Dr. Leonard Bryant eight years ago.

In the playtest, I used Middleton’s Rolls Royce and its caltrops and smoke screen to get away. I have to say that as the players did not have their souped-up cars, the chase felt very one-sided. My advice is to make the odds even, whether souped-up or not.

Minsheng uses the martial art Moo Gi Gong deliberately so that during this fight, he can chip or throw pool balls at the characters and even fight with paired pool cues! Also, the Drunken Style thugs accompanying him will use the art of evasion and hiding to disappear under the pool tables and pop up again behind the players for surprise attacks!

I also used another prop of a photo of the Delta Force team with their names written on the back. A similar photo, this time with their new nicknames on the back, can be found in Cheng Wang’s study, revealing their new identities! Talon has not changed his face and could be identified. However, he used to have a shaven head with a goatee and now is clean-shaven with a full head of hair, so it is not immediately obvious.

8. Canary in a Neodymium Mine

The Neodymium mine is unregistered, as is the ownership of the land. It is in the middle of a desolate wasteland far from any relevant residents. It is also depleted of all its resources. Dr. Bryant had enough Neodymium for the Nightingale nearly a year ago and this last group of slaves have nearly worked their mine dry of anything profitable. As such, it is minimally guarded with only a dozen or so clan members in total, including those driving the last remaining vehicles. Vehicles include several dump trucks, haulage lorries and a digger. The only buildings on site are two porta-cabins, one used as an office where the foreman is likely to be found, and the office as a crew room for the clan workers. There is also a porta-loo cabin for the toilet.

When the player characters arrive, it is the final day for the mine. The slave miners are in extremely poor condition with unhealed injuries, poverty-stricken conditions, starving, weak and in the eyes of Shengyin, unfit for resale. Amongst the Chinese, there is one Western looking man who is tall and musclebound, with obvious cybernetic arms holding two machine-guns, one in each hand (Dax)! From his vantage point on the back of one of the dump trucks, he is directing all remaining slaves (25-30 or so) into one of the tunnels (a dead end). Explosives are set at the tunnel entrance and it is obvious that they intend to bury the slaves in the tunnel as their last diabolical act before vacating the mine, unless the player characters can stop them...

Dax’s face looks exactly as he did and can be recognized from the photo of the Delta Force team. He will not reveal anything and will struggle to overcome the group until he dies trying. Fachu Shengyin, however, has grown soft in his position and will give up the location of the Wang Gar hideout if severely pressed. He will even confirm that Cheng Wang, its leader, resides there! He knows not what the neodymium is for but has heard it’s for “Operation: As the Crow Flies.”

The playtest group sent two men in as U.N. health inspectors whilst the others took up sniper positions around the mine’s perimeter. Fachu immediately saw through the ruse and his men escorted the “inspector” into the cave with the slaves and blew the opening, thus trapping him inside. The other characters opened fire and a fight ensued. The players killed everyone apart from Fachu but, not before their ride was destroyed by Dax and Fachu’s “vehicle stopper” weapon, leaving the group stranded in the middle of China with no supplies and a dumper truck full of freed slaves. Luckily, they worked for an influential spy agency. Does your group?

9. Taken Under Their Wing

The Wang Gar clan’s hideout is based in a forest region high in the mountains (G.M.s, you can locate this anywhere you see fit). It consists of a walled complex similar to a monastery with traditional traits of Chinese architecture such as the bilateral symmetry of building placement and a courtyard which these buildings surround (often referred to as a “skywell”). The places of relevance within the compound include clan sleeping chambers, kitchen and dining area, recreation room, training grounds (indoor and outdoor), temple, meditation garden, central garden (with pagoda), library, central courtyard, master’s courtyard (in front of the master’s chambers) and the clan master’s chambers. The clan master’s chambers consist of a bedroom, dining room and a separate meditation room on the lower floor. On the upper floor, there is only a study and a weapons training room. From the training room there is also a beautiful balcony overhanging the mountain cliff. This balcony is heavily guarded from below but could also be a quick, easy point of access should the players discover it. It is certainly a better move than going in through the front door.

Cheng Wang is present as he does not leave his residence beyond the master’s courtyard. He is a fearless adversary and will probably be one of the hardest fights of the adventure. He is meant to be fought singularly against the players as a group. If he can keep hold of his weapons he will be a most formidable foe! As he fights, he will happily tell the player characters the tale of the Delta Force team, Dr. Bryant’s cybernetic work and

how Lang and his team earned their place in the clan through the treachery of Western governments, as he truly believes that the characters will soon be dead at his hands (or feet). He will also reveal that “*Operation: New Clothes*” will soon be complete and then there will be nothing they can do stop the influence of the newly formed “*SPECTRUM!*” If he realizes that he is about to be captured alive, he will commit hari-kari, dive off the balcony, or if pinned, swallow a suicide capsule in his tooth. He cannot be broken by torture.

My players climbed up the 200 foot (61 m) cliff face directly into Cheng Wang’s training room and fought him. They took a lot of damage, but eventually defeated him and found the photo of the Delta Force team and enough evidence to prosecute the rest of the Wang Gar clan. They then wired his home to blow and escaped the way they came, leaving no trace. True assassin style!

10. Bird’s Eye View

The players have accomplished the end of the sinister Wang Gar clan, a massive accomplishment. They are aware of *SPECTRUM*, *Operation: New Clothes*, and have discovered the real identity of Richard Lang! Things are looking promising, but there is still the matter of what *Operation: As the Crow Flies* and *Operation: New Clothes* actually entail, as well as the kidnapping of Camille Mathis to attend to. Well one of these, at least, is about to be answered. As soon as the players are somewhere more urban (such as a hotel or the airport), a car will pull up (maybe Middleton’s Rolls Royce), stop abruptly, and Camille is pushed out of the rear passenger door, bound and gagged, onto the sidewalk. The player characters are unaware as the car speeds off, but may be able to stop the car and its passengers if the G.M. wishes. Of course, the driver and passenger will provide no further intelligence than is already known.

Camille will tell them that when she was kidnapped she was gagged and blindfolded and taken aboard a private plane to a large house several hours away. It was relatively hot but the house was air-conditioned. When the blindfold was finally removed she was tied to a chair and in front of her, also bound and gagged, was her father, Commodore Lawrence Mathis. He looked unhurt but in obvious distress. She was taken away without being able to speak to him. Her kidnappers were led by an older Asian lady who cut Camille with the tip of a white fan. She slipped a flash drive into Camille’s pocket and instructed her that if she wanted to see her father alive again, she had 48 hours to break into the central server one of the largest broadcasting facilities in the world and upload the drive’s contents. The drive is bugged to alert the kidnappers if anyone tampers or attempts to read it. The upload will send a message to every television in the world and relay *SPECTRUM*’s ransom and terms. Camille must hijack the broadcast system of the famous Tokyo Skytree, the tallest structure in Japan!

Camille will be bewildered and in disbelief if told of Lang’s true identity. She will show some shock but the urgency of the current situation is of precedence. The journey over here has taken nearly half a day, which means she only has 36 hours left to upload the footage. She was a highly successful thief once, but is nearly eight years out of practice and has never tackled such a task in such a short amount of time. She needs the player characters’ help and fast! The Tokyo Skytree has a public restaurant as well as an observation tower. Beyond this observation tower however, the rest is purely authorized personnel only access. The

players have to decide whether they strike during daytime or nighttime, open or closed times and the best means of infiltrating the building. Should they go internally with some disguises or externally with some high-rise climbing? Other than Googling the Skytree on the flight to Japan, they have very little time for a reconnaissance of the facility, possibly only a daytime exploration for a nighttime heist. Whatever the method, the player characters should remember that all security personnel are innocents just doing their job and they should endeavor not to harm them in any way. Camille (or the techy in the group) can easily discover that the main control room is the best location for the upload. This is always occupied (and active) and its personnel will need to be evacuated or restrained.

In reality, the upload does not transmit a videotaped message to the world; instead, it sends a signal with the appropriate code (obtained in Commodore Mathis’ secret study) to release the United States’ E.M.P.E.R.O.R. (Electro-Magnetic Pulse Emission & Radiation, Omni-directional Ray) satellite into low orbit and allow it to be controlled by Angelo aboard Lang’s unique flying carrier, the “Nightingale.” Once the signal has been sent it cannot be stopped (it’s not an ongoing signal). Camille will order the retreat but will not follow the characters downwards. Instead, she leaves them and heads upstairs. If they call out to her she will simply ignore them and continue. She is headed to the roof (so she may need to climb externally), where she is awaiting retrieval by the rest of her team consisting of Talon and several Wang Gar clan members. They are waiting for her on the roof with a helicopter (or even the Nightingale if you wish) hovering above them and they will fight anyone who attempts to stop their escape. Talon will use any or all of his exploding finger joints, but this may leave him in a vulnerable position to hang on to anything should the fight take him too close to the edge of the roof or antennas. Camille will reveal herself as the Jade Fan Lady and fight to the death, as the player characters are no longer needed in her plans. Both Talon and Camille can be killed at this point also; or if they escape, they can return in the final fight aboard the Nightingale.

In the original playtest, the group did not let Camille out of their sight, already suspicious of her identity and whether or not the Commodore was actually worth saving! I had Camille disappear into the toilets to be able to escape, but one thing to remember, G.M.s: Camille doesn’t have to escape if you don’t want her to. She is dispensable at this point, and can either still be a friend of the group, or she could die. Either way, it won’t affect the rest of the adventure.

11. Home to Roost

Just when the players are feeling disheartened, they will be surprised by a new lead: some information on Richard Lang’s property holdings. The address in Santa Cruz did not refer to Santa Cruz, California, but rather a location on the Portuguese island of Flores in the Azores Islands! This information took some serious digging and someone spent a lot of effort trying to keep it secure. The building itself is a large mansion with relatively small grounds, a simple garden and both an indoor and outdoor pool. Being held at Lang’s Flores abode is Camille’s father, Lawrence Mathis. He is guarded at all times by the cybernetic duo of Barrack and Tanner (as well as by as many Wang Gar clan members as the G.M. feels is suitable), but these two have grown quite complacent with their tedious assignment and are bitter about the

waste of their potential at such an unskilled duty. They can be easily surprised but will fight to the death in a panic if disturbed. For the scenario, these villainous guards have been set up for a fight in a large room as Tanner's flamethrower will likely set most of the surrounding furnishings ablaze. Whether this room is a lounge, drawing room, library or a bedroom, I will leave to the G.M., but a leap from an upstairs window to escape the flames always makes for good action!

Once the Commodore is rescued, the player characters will discover that he has been unharmed throughout his captivity. He knows little about the plots and schemes of Lang and will be stunned by any news that Lang is really Tony Roth, the little boy that he used to have play in his house all those years ago. If he is told about Camille he will go into shock and will need some time to gather his composure (time the players don't have). All he can tell them is that he received the letter from his old friend, Brigadier General Roth, and assumed that the news was regarding the Wang Gar clan and feared that Roth may do something reckless, so he took the bait and flew across the Atlantic to meet at the Smithsonian museum in Washington. During the flight on board a privately chartered airplane, there was extreme turbulence and the plane was pulled upwards suddenly, ending with a giant clang sound like they'd struck something hard and metallic! The plane was boarded by Lang, Talon and his two guards. They were taken aboard the Nightingale, a giant flying carrier, where it was clear that some sort of giant magnet had torn their small plane out of the sky!

Whilst in captivity, Commodore Mathis has had little communication with Lang. He was forced to train homing pigeons in four locations, two in London, one in New York and one in Washington D.C. None were near any political locations so he did as commanded and has been training them for the last six months. If the characters mention the name *Operation: As the Crow Flies*, he can tell them that he has heard Barrack and Tanner mention a better assignment at the neighboring Corvo Island. Mathis has been allowed to read from the library and will be able to tell the players that Corvo Island literally translates to English as "Island of the Crow" and is also home to several hypogeums, ancient catacombs and burial chambers. He will suggest the characters investigate further.

I used another voicemail message from SARA to inform the players of the intelligence on Lang's Santa Cruz residence. If you G.M.s need another twist, then the fact that there is another Santa Cruz in the Azores (on a different island to Flores) may be of interest. This is also an opportunity to put in any other locations that you may want to use (I would still like to do a scenario in Dubai sometime). You can hand the players some intel on Lawrence Mathis' holding in a newly discovered secret property held by Lang (or the Wang Gar clan) anywhere you like, perhaps Mathis is currently even held on a yacht out in the island's bay...

12. The Crow's Nest

Indeed, Doctor Bryant has been orchestrating the schemes of Lang from an underground hypogeum on Corvo Island. How the player characters get to Corvo is up to them, but if they do an aerial reconnaissance of the island, they will be able to see several parked cars outside a particular hypogeum entrance (and a helicopter or small plane if Middleton's Rolls Royce is absent). The rest of the island is sparsely populated. Around the hypogeum are

a few guards and members of the Wang Gar clan. Other than one bodyguard each, none of the investors were allowed to bring any other security. The cars belong to these *Spectrum* members. The players should use caution to infiltrate this secret base.

The hypogeum itself is unrecognizable from its previous purpose. It is a simple structure with one main channel leading deep down, far beneath the surface. The tunnel has only two side passages, one leading off either side. One leads to an infirmary with cybernetic equipment and the other, modest living quarters with a bed, toilet and kitchenette. Following the main tunnel leads to a large chamber which has been cleared and filled with Doctor Bryant's computers, screens, laboratorial workstations and machinery for aircraft mechanics. The work on the cybernetic bombs as well as the Nightingale's repairs, were conducted from here. These workstations may act as cover for the player characters to listen to the *Coup de Grace* next...

13. Coup de Grace

As the player characters make their way into the heart of the hypogeum, they will see the Doctor's workspace, a wide open room with a few closed security doors on the far side. On the opposite wall is a cinematic T.V. screen in front of which are fourteen chairs occupied by the familiar faces of the criminal investors (at least those still alive). In front of the screen stands Richard Lang, Camille Mathis (as her Asian lady alter ego), Liwei Chao, Mo and Goldie. Lang walks into center stage and begins to address his audience in an even more egotistical tone than usual. Read the following aloud to the players:

"As you are all code-named after a color of the rainbow, I have christened this venture's gathering of like-minded criminals: 'SPECTRUM.' So if I may, ladies, gentlemen and members of SPECTRUM, I welcome you here today to witness Operation: As the Crow Flies and the return of your investments. Both your expertise and your funds are about to be rewarded for as a Mr. Edward Gibbons was once quoted as saying, 'Gratitude is expensive but revenge is profitable.' SPECTRUM's new motto if you will indulge me. Unfortunately, Mr. Violet could not be with us today, and neither could <insert any dead villains here>."

"There is an English legend from 1815 that tells of a member of the wealthy Rothschild Family receiving imminent news about the outcome of the battle of Waterloo. This news was allegedly sent via carrier pigeon arriving much sooner than any official herald and enabled Nathan Rothschild to invest all his money into British government bonds before other investors could be so bold. Now I too, a child of Roth, will utilize the same weapon against various targets on both U.S. and U.K. soil: London's Old Town Exchange, New York's Wall Street, England's MI5 Headquarters, and the U.S. Pentagon!"

"These areas are highly protected by land, sea and aerial defenses, including anti-missile protection. But Operation: As the Crow Flies uses the ultimate espionage against these systems: the undetected bird! You see, my Rothschild weapon also utilizes actual pigeons. These commonly fly over these areas daily and thanks to the combined engineering of Dr. Bryant, Mr. Red and Mr. Yellow, small yet deadly incendiary devices have been cybernetically implanted into some of our best-trained homing pigeons."

"Operation: New Clothes saw the military Electro-Magnetic Pulse Emission & Radiation Omni-directional Ray, code-named

E.M.P.E.R.O.R., move into a low orbit where we could gain control of the satellite and emit its E.M.P. at our whim. This was immediately used by my team aboard the Nightingale, named after the mechanical bird in the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale, because it 'sings' to the Emperor, to navigate these suicide bomber-pigeons across the Atlantic Ocean. Once they reach land, each will find its destination of its own accord.

"Now if you would turn your attention to the screen, we can watch the events unfold."

Dr. Bryant switches on a large T.V. screen displaying several different onboard cameras. One for each bomber pigeon as well as displays of E.T.A.s to each destination and their imminent explosion. The best way to stop the pigeons is to use the E.M.P.E.R.O.R. satellite. The players could either use the EMP to guide the pigeons to the middle of the ocean or stop any EMP emissions by destroying the controls in the Nightingale whereby the misguided pigeons get lost and fall prey to fatigue over the ocean. If the player characters do not attack at this point then it is likely they will be discovered by some of Dr. Bryant's motion detectors placed around the hypogeum base, or guards. Either way, it is inevitable that a firefight will ensue. The SPECTRUM investors will flee whilst their bodyguards may attempt to buy them the time they need to escape. Lang, Chao and Camille will immediately flee in a nearby elevator to a secret hangar whereby they will board the Nightingale (piloted by Angelo). The Nightingale could not be seen from outside as the characters arrived as it remains hidden from sight in this hangar, able to rise through the hangar's ceiling shutters from underneath one of the volcanic lakes on the island! Any of the investors can be killed, subdued, injured or escape. This is the time to work out which NPCs you, as the G.M., want in any sequels. If the Nightingale takes off with Lang imminently escaping, the players will need a method of catching up to the flying carrier. By now they are probably aware that Lord Chester Middleton's Rolls Royce has flying capabilities and this may be a time to fight Middleton, his wheelchair weapons and of course, Reeves. Otherwise, G.M.s should make a helicopter or alternative available for the chase.

The times for each flight are incredibly rough but are not so important in the scheme of things. Don't get bogged down by them. Dr. Bryant calculated them perfectly and released them at the precise times. If you wish the birds to arrive at the same time you can arrange it, if you want the player characters to witness them leave then the team has plenty of time to attempt to stop them. I allowed a travel time from Corvo island of: London: 30 hours. NY: 48 hours. Washington: 45 hours. So in the playtest, getting to this point from the Tokyo Skytree, was over 48 hours allowing me to give all four pigeons a countdown of one hour until detonation. This time constraint was manipulated by when I revealed the location of Lang's Santa Cruz home. As long as the players have been there longer than two days since Tokyo, it was always going to be a one hour E.T.A.

14. The Nightingale

This large flying carrier is actually a makeshift merger of an airplane and a helicopter with rotor blades extending from the wings in a similar fashion to VTOL airplanes but on a much larger scale. In fact, the Nightingale is so large that it can fit a small aircraft inside as was its primary function. It could almost

be mistaken for something out of *Thunderbirds*! It was purpose-built for kidnapping Commodore Mathis' plane but was intended to be utilized time and again by the Wang Gar clan. There is a large cargo hold at the rear with room for a certain Rolls Royce to safely board as well as hold personnel. In the center undercarriage is a large, powerful neodymium magnet (identical to scrapyard cranes in design) held on a winch that can be lowered and raised. It can be raised and concealed within the central chamber of the vehicle and is in full view of the main control center/cockpit with a walkway design around it. There is also access to a rooftop platform with enough room for a small helicopter to land and be secured (so long as the Nightingale travels at less than 80 mph/128 km).

The inside is relatively open plan and follows a design intended for operational use with little comforts (the Delta Force team and clan are hardy individuals). It has an array of sophisticated controls allowing for just a pilot, co-pilot, communications officer and a rear gunner if required. Three skilled pilots could operate all four positions if absolutely required, two in an emergency (on communications and main pilot) or one pilot to crash land in a worst case scenario (such as the players killing any pilots). The controls to the E.M.P.E.R.O.R. satellite are also in the cockpit. There are few weapons installed in the Nightingale, fixed twin machine-guns at the front, a 360 degree swivel machine-gun on the underside and a rear 90 degree machine-gun topside. All do 5D6 damage and are operated from the cockpit. The Commodore was kidnapped by the Nightingale's massive magnetic winch and taken aboard.

However the players get aboard the Nightingale, whether they are captured via the same tactic as the Commodore or they board themselves during take-off or in flight (perhaps crashing through the cargo doors), this scenario is likely to be the final fight. All of the adventure's main antagonists are on aboard, all secrets are revealed and time is running out as display screens in the cockpit show the carrier pigeons E.T.A.s. Angelo is piloting (along with some Wang Gar clan henchmen), Lang/Roth and Liwei join him in the cockpit and Camille and/or Doctor Bryant are also aboard (if still alive). Let the battle commence!

The design of the Nightingale is deliberately set up for some epic fight scenes. Does Liwei head up to the rooftop to use his Ninja hang glider and escape? Can the player characters handle a fistfight on top of a moving aircraft? If they smashed their way in through the cargo doors there is room for a vacuum to drag the player characters and NPCs alike out into the ocean! The controls to the E.M.P.E.R.O.R. satellite will mean a battle in the cockpit for sure, but one thing to remember is that the controls to the giant magnet behind them are also in here. If the man-machine that is Lang/Roth gets too close to the contraption, a skillful computer operator may be able to capture him alive, although too much magnetism would cause a horrific death for Lang as well as destruction of nearby parts of the Nightingale itself, perhaps causing the behemoth to crash!

15. Epilogue

Much of this depends on the outcome of the final fight. Hopefully, the player characters saved the day but I am sure there are still many loose ends to tie up. Which NPC villains fled? Liwei Chao? Camille? What about the investors? Which of them survived to continue the newly founded work of SPECTRUM?

What bodyguards will they have to protect them now? Then there is the mysterious Mr. Violet, presumably from the unrepresented seventh continent of Antarctica? Who is he (or she)? Why did he attempt to have Lang assassinated? Does he now step forward to be part of SPECTRUM?

If Lang or Camille are still alive then they are likely to be furious at their failure. After everything they have endured and undergone, only to have their revenge taken from underneath them at the penultimate moment is too much to bear. They will become slightly more insane and it would be great to end the adventure with another assassination attempt on their father's life, perhaps where it all began at the Sydney Opera House or Mathis' home!

Roll credits....

Non-Player Characters

Brigadier General Roth

A very loud and outspoken person, he commands respect and discipline in all he meets. The only person he considers a real friend is Commodore Lawrence Mathis of the British Royal Air Force. Their initial meeting was supposed to be for a military visit, however the two prematurely bumped into each other at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. where they had taken their children to see the exhibit on Cher Ami, a famous homing pigeon, as both officers are keen pigeon fanciers. They instantly took a liking to each other and the two became close friends as did their children, Tony and Camille. When his son was captured by the Wang Gar clan he was forbidden to negotiate a deal and his superiors ordered an airstrike on the Wang Gar clan's hideout. He truly believes his son to be dead and wants to be face to face with Cheng Wang so he can personally take his revenge. He has met with Lang a couple of times now and Lang's information has proven to be accurate. He has no suspicions surrounding his identity. Anthony Roth Senior actually loves his son and Lang's anger is misguided. Should Lang meet his end at the hands of the player characters and their agency and should the Brigadier General discover his son was still alive, he may have resentment towards them for taking his only son. Perhaps a new enemy has been born...

True Name: Brigadier General Anthony Roth Senior.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Country of Origin: U.S.

Background: Straight (see *Ninjas & Superspies*™, page 11, for details).

Family Background: Raised by parents.

Hit Points: 45, **S.D.C.:** 29.

Height: 5 feet, 8 inches tall (1.73 m). **Weight:** 220 pounds (99 kg).

Age: 58

Chi: 8

Attributes: I.Q. 15, M.A. 16, M.E. 9, P.S. 8, P.P. 7, P.E. 8, P.B. 10, Spd 10.

Disposition: Polite, friendly, courteous but underneath, has a stern interior.

Experience Level: 10th level Mercenary: Academy Officer O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military, Advanced Military, Helicopter Aviation, Combat Aircraft, Intelligence, Advanced Pilot, Mechanical.



Primary Martial Art Form: Hand to Hand: Commando.

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Kick Attack: 1D6 damage, Critical Strike on Natural 19 or 20, Knockout/Stun on a Natural 18, 19, or 20. All military W.P.s as well as W.P. Pistol, W.P. Machine-Gun, W.P. Submachine-Gun.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +2 to strike, +5 to parry and dodge, +4 damage, +3 to pull punch, +7 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: None.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Carries a .38 special revolver (3D6).

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

The Mui-Fa Assassin

Lance Hollister is the real name of this infamous assassin. If you need someone killed in Australia and have the right connections, then he is who you contact. He is nicknamed the Mui-Fa Assassin because he leaves behind a Mui-Fa flower with each corpse. His technique is always the same. He is a crack shot sniper who always targets his mark in a crowded, public area and he always aims for the heart. For his attempt on Richard Lang's life he was hired by the mysterious Mr. Violet! Luckily for Lang, the Wang Gar have taught him to be paranoid and always wear a bullet-proof vest. If Hollister escapes he will attempt to complete his mission but next time would aim for Lang's head.

True Name: Lance Hollister.

Alignment: Aberrant.

Country of Origin: Australia.

Background: Driven.

Family Background: Mysterious.

Hit Points: 42, **S.D.C.:** 75.

Height: 6 feet tall (1.83 m). **Weight:** 195 pounds (88 kg).

Age: 29

Chi: 30

Attributes: I.Q. 15, M.A. 14, M.E. 17, P.S. 19, P.P. 18, P.E. 20, P.B. 12, Spd 19.

Disposition: Calm and collected. He will keep a cool head under the pressure of his chosen profession, even if he is forced to run.

Experience Level: 5th level Espionage Agent: Gadeteer Agent O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Assassin, Surveillance, Professional thief, Helicopter aviation, Weapon construction.

Primary Martial Art Form: Bok Pai (Crane).

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Multiple Dodge, Circular Parry, Crane Fist (special, 1D8), Backhand, Claw Hand, Palm Strike, Kick Attack, Crescent Kick, Axe Kick, Backward Sweep, Reverse Turning Kick, Death Blow, Body Flip, Critical Flip, Elbow, Forearm, Knockout/Stun. Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Body Flip/Throw, Crane Stance (special, +2 strike including critical, +4 to parry, +6 to maintain balance), W.P. Pistol, Rifle, and Submachine-Gun (all include a bonus of +1 to strike)!

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +2 to Crane Fist Strike, +4 to strike on all kicks, +3 to strike, +4 to parry and dodge, +1 to Crane Fist damage, +6 damage, +2 to pull punch, +4 to roll with impact, +5 to escape arm holds.

Other Bonuses: +1 to save vs mental attacks, +3 to save vs toxins.

Martial Art Powers: Bassai Kata (Fortress Penetration), Wrist Hardening, Chagi, Stone Ox.

Cybernetics: Electro-stun weapon in left hand.

Weapons: Always has his trusted Model 30-11 sniping Rifle (5D6) as well as a backup P5 Walther (2D6), both with silencers. Has a plastic version of the Walther as well.

Other Equipment: Favorite multi-optics helmet (+1 to strike) as well as individual, weapon sight, infrared distancing binoculars, night sight, pocket night viewer, thermo-imager, two rope ladders/grappling hooks. Spare ammunition.

Average Clan Member

Most have been raised and trained by the clan since they were young. They live, breathe, and would die for the clan and its cause – not matter how diabolic. As a matter of fact, all clan members will all commit suicide rather than be captured and interrogated.

True Name: Varies.

Alignment: Miscreant.

Country of Origin: China.

Background: Varies.

Family Background: Varies.

Hit Points: 30, **S.D.C.:** 44.

Height: 5 feet, 10 inches feet tall (1.78 m). **Weight:** 168 pounds (76 kg).

Age: 24

Chi: 19

Attributes: I.Q. 8, M.A. 10, M.E. 9, P.S. 14, P.P. 13, P.E. 14, P.B. 11, Spd 12.

Disposition: Silent, dedicated, and brainwashed by the clan. The clan is everything – honor and respect it at all times.

Experience Level: 3rd level Martial Artist: Worldly Martial Artist O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military Program, Oriental Studies.

Primary Martial Art Form: Ch'In-Na (Seizing).

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Roll, Maintain Balance, Automatic Parry, Combination Parry/Attack, Disarm, Fingertip Attack, Claw Hand, Death Blow, Squeeze, Pin, Choke, Paralysis Attack (Vital Points), Arm Hold, Leg Hold, Neck Hold, Automatic Hold, Knockout/Stun on Natural 19 or 20, Knockout/Stun from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 20, Critical Strike from rear.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +1 to strike, +1 to parry and dodge, +3 damage, +1 to maintain balance, +2 to roll with impact.

Secondary Martial Art Form: Varies (G.M.'s choice – have fun!)

Other Bonuses: None unless from secondary martial art.

Martial Art Powers: Art of Stealth, Art of Disguise, Any Atemi Powers but usually Neural Atemi, Grasping Hand.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: None; rely on grasping maneuvers (although as terrorists, the G.M. should decide otherwise if the melee requires it).

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.



Camille Mathis

A motherless child, Miss Mathis lead a lonely, boring life in the confines of the British military. Whether on a base or at her home in London, she was surrounded only by her personal bodyguards or her current (and always new) nanny. It grew too much for her and she quickly learnt to sneak past her security to seek out the dangers in life. Any thrill she could find, the better. Most of it was illegal, be it drugs, racing, gambling or her favorite, stealing. She was a natural at it as she had no fear. It seemed her recklessness was a desire to actually get caught so that her father may notice her over his duties as an officer. Soon she found herself an adult and on her own, and while still continuing the thrills of larceny she moved into information theft but was caught when she took a job in China which was well above her depth (G.M.s, I leave the details of this theft up to yourselves to elaborate on).

Camille was imprisoned for fifteen years in a Chinese military prison, where she shared a cell with an elderly woman who was an expert at the martial art of Chi Hsuan Men (White Jade Fan). She became her student and quickly mastered it herself. During the last 9 months to a year, Camille was visited by her childhood friend, Tony Roth, only he was disguised as the international re-

altor, Richard Lang. Answering all her secret questions to prove his identity, he asked her to join him in his plot for revenge (not revealing his full plans over a prison meeting). Camille was not sure at first, but her cellmate and protector inside died a few weeks before (of old age), so she felt alone again and agreed. She was aware that she would undergo cybernetic surgery to disguise her identity and she modelled herself on her former cellmate. Lang/Cheng Wang pulled some strings (and blackmailed some wardens) and got her officially released early. Mathis shared Lang's anger at his father as her own father had abandoned her to rot in this foreign prison. If only for her cell mate and now Lang/Roth, she surely would have.

Her part in the plot is to manipulate the player characters into helping her reach her father's study (a thing that the Wang Gar clan could not arrange). She is to earn their trust and plead with them to aid her to break into the Tokyo Skytree control room.

True Name: Camille Ova Mathis.

Alignment: Miscreant.

Country of Origin: U.K.

Background: Alignment Change (good to bad).

Family Background: Raised by father.

Hit Points: 45, **S.D.C.:** 33.

Height: 5 feet, 5 inches tall (1.65 m). **Weight:** 120 pounds (54 kg).

Age: 33

Chi: 14

Attributes: I.Q. 15, M.A. 23, M.E. 15, P.S. 12, P.P. 20, P.E. 9, P.B. 22, Spd 12.

Disposition: Ruthless and calculating. Manipulative and incredibly calm under high pressure circumstances. She can easily keep up the ruse of a daring but vulnerable Camille.

Experience Level: 6th level Espionage Agent: Wired Agent O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Spy Network Administration, Telephone hacking, Electronic Warfare, Oriental Studies.

Primary Martial Art Form: Chi Hsuan Men (White Jade Fan).

Attacks per Melee: 3

Combat Info: Fingertip Attack, Death Blow, Disarm, Paralysis (Vital Points), Knockout/Stun on Natural 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear. W.P. Jade Fan (W.P. *Blunt* +3 to strike, +2 parry, +1 throw), W.P. Jade Fan Paired.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +5 to strike, +5 to parry and dodge, +2 damage, +3 to roll with impact, +5 to disarm.

Other Bonuses: Charm/Impress 70%. Trust/Intimidate 88%.

Martial Art Powers: Blood Flow Atemi (1D8 damage to H.P.), Grasping Hand Atemi, Withering Flesh Atemi.

Cybernetics: Bio-electrical wrinkle manipulator, melanin release device, eyelid compression device, larynx manipulator.

Weapons: Jade fans only (1D4 damage). Camille has eight on her person which she will throw if necessary.

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

Minsheng Qianfan (Smuggler)

This guy is one of the worst kind of scum the characters will meet. He has gained some power and wealth trading in the smuggling of illegal goods and that includes the trafficking of human slaves! He accidentally left a chalky fingerprint on the letter to Commodore Mathis and it is up to the player characters to inter-

rogate this miscreant. Feel free to use whatever force necessary. His Moo Gi Gong martial art utilizes his current surrounding of the pool balls and pool cues as weapons. He may look unarmed but a Moo Gi Gong expert is always ready for a fight.

True Name: Minsheng Qianfan.

Alignment: Miscreant.

Country of Origin: China.

Background: Hunted.

Family Background: Orphaned. Raised by relatives.

Hit Points: 44, **S.D.C.:** 37.

Height: 5 feet, 9 inches tall (1.75 m). **Weight:** 172 pounds (77 kg).

Age: 27

Chi: 14

Attributes: I.Q. 13, M.A. 10, M.E. 8, P.S. 17, P.P. 17, P.E. 14, P.B. 12, Spd 16.

Disposition: Unscrupulous but only confident when he is with his lackeys. He will squeal like a baby if cornered.

Experience Level: 5th level Free Agent: Wandering Free Agent O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Oriental Studies, Cultural, Language, Security Specialist, Locksmith & Security Systems, Advanced Infantry.

Primary Martial Art Form: Moo Gi Gong.

Attacks per Melee: 3

Combat Info: Roll, Maintain Balance, Leap, Back Flip, Multiple Dodge, Knife Hand, Backhand, Kick Attack, Crescent Kick, Backward Sweep, Jump Kick, Death Blow, Knockout/Stun, Critical Strike on Natural 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear, Choke with found flexible objects, all Ancient W.P.s with a bonus of +1, W.P. Paired.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +7 to initiative, +3 to strike, +4 to parry and dodge, +3 damage, +2 to entangle.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: Iai-Jutsu (Sword Drawing), +7 to initiative (included above).

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Pool balls (1D4), pool cues (1D4+1), kusari-gama (1D10).

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

Pool Hall Thugs

These are Minsheng's hangers-on, his yes people looking for a small dose of power and influence in their small pond. Most are actually on the miscreant side of anarchist for as they do not make the decisions they do aid Minsheng in the trafficking of human slaves and they rarely bat an eyelid! They are, however, complete cowards and will flee if there is too much gunfire or they are outmatched. They will not show loyalty to a dead man. In the pool hall they will use their martial art powers of vanish, hide and evade using the cover of the pool tables.

True Name: Varies.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Country of Origin: Varies.

Background: Varies.

Family Background: Varies.

Hit Points: 27, **S.D.C.:** 32.

Height: 5 feet, 8 inches tall (1.73 m). **Weight:** 172 pounds (77 kg).

Age: Varies, mid-twenties.

Chi: 14

Attributes: I.Q. 7, M.A. 21, M.E. 7, P.S. 17 P.P. 16, P.E. 14, P.B. 9, Spd 11.

Disposition: Violent, aggressive, weak on their own. Will surrender if cornered.

Experience Level: 3rd level Free Agent: Wandering Free Agent O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Oriental Culture, Cultural, Language, Body-guard (+1 strike with W.P.s), Basic Military, Vehicle Construction.

Primary Martial Art Form: Drunken Style Kung Fu.

Attacks per Melee: 3

Combat Info: Roll with Punch/Fall, Somersault, Stagger, Roll, Back Flip, Dodge, Parry, Automatic Dodge, Multiple Dodge, Combination Parry/Attack, Disarm, Automatic Roll, Knife Hand, Backhand, Palm Strike, Kick Attack, Tripping Leg/Hook, Snap Kick, Crescent Kick, Backward Sweep, Reverse Turning Kick, Drop Kick, Deathblow, Body Block, Crush, Pin, Choke, Combination Strike/Parry, Combination Grab/Knee, Knee, Elbow, Forearm, Arm Hold, Leg Hold, Body Hold, Neck Hold, Knockout/Stun from behind, Knockout/Stun on Natural 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 19 or 20, W.P. Knife (+4 strike, +4 parry, +2 throw), W.P. Automatic Pistol (or submachine-gun).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +2 to strike, +5 to parry and dodge, +2 damage, +8 to roll with impact, +2 to somersault/back flip, +2 to stagger, +1 to rear attacks (Backward Sweep, Backhand).

Other Bonuses: Trust/intimidate 70%.

Martial Art Powers: Art of Vanishing, Art of Hiding, Art of Evasion (use the pool tables to vanish, hide and spring up using those critical rear attacks).

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: All will have either a knife (1D6) or an automatic pistol (2D6). Some may carry Mini-Uzi submachine-guns (2D6). In such a sudden fight as the pool hall, they will predominantly fight hand to hand unless a chase ensues.

Other Equipment: Pool cues (1D4+1).

Fachu Shengyin (Foreman)

Fachu is appointed as the foreman of the now defunct neodymium mine. He is a much less disciplined clan member from his time spent managing the mine as he has become a little slothful. As such, the mine security is also less disciplined and Dax is allowed to run around throwing his power wherever he likes. He is known as "the Noisemaker" for his love of explosives and his arsenal of weaponry includes many incendiaries.

True Name: Feng Boqin.

Alignment: Miscreant.

Country of Origin: China.

Background: Straight.

Family Background: Raised by poverty-stricken parents.

Hit Points: 42, **S.D.C.:** 50.

Height: 6 feet tall (1.83 m). **Weight:** 224 pounds (101 kg).

Age: 28

Chi: 19

Attributes: I.Q. 10, M.A. 14, M.E. 7, P.S. 18, P.P. 13, P.E. 14, P.B. 8, Spd 9.

Disposition: Maniacal, crazy and extremely loud. Likes the sound of his own, bellowing voice.

Experience Level: 5th level Gizmoteer: Dreamer Gizmoteer O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Explosives construction, Weapons construction, Containment fabricating. Ancient weapons, Guerrilla warfare.

Primary Martial Art Form: Ch’In-Na (Seizing).

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Roll, Maintain Balance, Automatic Parry, Combination Parry/Attack, Disarm, Fingertip Attack, Claw Hand, Deathblow, Squeeze, Pin, Choke, Paralysis Attack (Vital Points), Arm Hold, Leg Hold, Neck Hold, Automatic Hold, Knockout/Stun on Natural 19 or 20, Knockout/Stun from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +1 to strike, +3 to parry and dodge, +9 to damage, +4 to roll with impact, +1 to maintain balance.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: Art of Vanishing, Art of Hiding, Art of Escape, Open Hand Atemi, Healing Atemi.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Two 9mm Uzi submachine-guns (2D6) on his person although he has access to a full arsenal, including a back-firing pistol and his personal favorite – the vehicle stopper! He is also obsessed with explosives which is why he is known as the “Noisemaker.”

Other Equipment: Cigarettes and a lighter although he doesn’t smoke, himself.

Cheng Wang (Clan Leader)

The Wang Gar clan themselves are known throughout the Chinese (and some international) underworld for their expertise in kidnapping and extortion. Cheng Wang inherited the leadership over two decades ago when he slain his father in combat. It was by accident that the clan kidnapped Dr. Bryant eight years ago. He was simply part of a tourist convoy the clan took as hostages in a firefight. The weak doctor quickly spilt his identity in an effort to barter for his life. Bryant’s pleas worked and the U.S. air force sent Roth Jnr. and his Delta Force team to rescue the cybernetics expert. The team’s mission failed, they were captured, tortured and body parts chopped off and sent as part of a negotiation attempt. Cheng realized that no deal was going to be made so they moved location. In the following airstrike, only a small portion of the clan that were still to depart were actually killed. 80% of the clan survived and with them, the American soldiers. The Delta Force team quickly grew angry at their former leaders for abandoning them to be tortured and killed and they persuaded Cheng Wang to keep them alive. They struck an unknown chord in him and he agreed (some clan members speculate that he saw leader abilities in Tony Roth that would make for a great successor to the clan’s leadership as Cheng has no children of his own). Although still chained, they were taught martial arts that suited their capabilities and Dr. Bryant was allowed to give them reconstructive, basic cybernetics to train. Over the years they earned the respect of the clan and were indoctrinated into its community and were given new names as a display of their new lives. Cheng would have liked to have built cybernetics into all clan members but it is against their spiritualism. As such, he allowed

further construction of the former Delta Force team into the war machines they are today and even funded the construction of the Nightingale. Although Lang has proven himself, Cheng is nobody’s fool and has Liwei Chao overseeing his every move. As it happens, his paranoia is incorrect and Lang is truly on course to execute his plan in full. All of the funds and contacts at Lang’s disposal are actually courtesy of Cheng Wang.

True Name: Cheng Wang.

Alignment: Diabolic.

Country of Origin: China.

Background: Straight.

Family Background: Abandoned by parents. Raised in Martial Arts clan.

Hit Points: 79, **S.D.C.:** 101.

Height: 5 feet, 7 inches tall (1.70 m). **Weight:** 182 pounds (82 kg).

Age: 53

Chi: 188 (*Taido!*).

Attributes: I.Q. 9, M.A. 20, M.E.10, P.S. 21, P.P. 23, P.E. 22, P.B. 8, Spd 19.

Disposition: Stern and serious. Confident in his own abilities but will not underestimate his opponent. Will speak only in Chinese but can understand English. **Note:** Cheng is not an honorable person but will pretend to be if confronted.

Experience Level: 10th level Martial Artist: Dedicated Martial Artist O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Maths, Literacy: Chinese.

Primary Martial Art Form: Ch’In-Na (Seizing).

Attacks per Melee: 5

Combat Info: Roll, Maintain Balance, Automatic Parry, Combination Parry/Attack, Disarm, Fingertip Attack, Claw Hand, Death Blow, Squeeze, Pin, Choke, Paralysis Attack (Vital Points), Arm Hold, Leg Hold, Neck Hold, Automatic Hold, Knockout/Stun on Natural 19 or 20, Knockout/Stun from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear, Deathblow on Natural 20.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +6 to strike, +8 to parry and dodge, +15 to damage, +5 to roll with impact, +2 to maintain balance.

Martial Art Powers: Art of Stealth, Art of Mystic Invisibility (80%), Grasping Hand Atemi, Zanshin.

Secondary Martial Art Form: Taido (spins & Falls).

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Back Flip, Turn with Punch/Fall/Impact (special!), Forward Spin (Special!), Backward Turn (Special!), Multiple Dodge, Circular Parry, Spinning Evasion (Special!), Backhand, Rotary Palm Strike (Special!), Trip/Leg Hook, Crescent Kick, Backward Sweep, Reverse Turning Kick, Flying Reverse Spinning Kick (Special!), Spinning Leap Attack (Special!), Knockout/Stun, Knockout/Stun from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 20, Critical Strike from rear.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +8 to initiative, +5 to strike, +9 to parry and dodge, +6 to damage, +4 to Turn, +4 to Back Flip, +3 to Spin, +2 to roll with impact.

Martial Art Powers: Tamashiwara, Iai-Jutsu, Hardened Chi, Calm Minds, Kaijutsu, Karumi-Jutsu.

Tertiary Martial Art Form: Zanji Shinjinken-Ryu (Swordsmanship).

Attacks per Melee: 9

Combat Info: Maintain Balance, Multiple Dodge, Circular Parry, Combination Parry/Attack, Power Block/Parry (damages!), Automatic Roll, Break Fall, Kick Attack, Backward Sweep, Jump Kick, Death Blow on Natural 20, Leap Attack Combination Strike/Parry, Combination Grab/Slash (Special!), Forearm, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear, Knockout/Stun on a Natural 20, Knockout/Stun from rear, W.P. Katana (+4 strike, +5 parry, +2 throw), W.P. Bokken (+4 strike, +3 parry, +3 throw), W.P. Bo Staff (+4 strike, +6 parry, +3 throw), W.P. Spear (+4 strike, +4 parry, +3 throw), W.P. Naginata (+4 strike, +4 parry, +3 throw).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +8 to initiative, +11 to strike, +6 to parry, +7 to dodge, +6 to damage, +4 to roll with impact, +1 to maintain balance.

Martial Art Powers: Iai-Jutsu, Falling Technique, Stone Ox, Kime Kata, Warrior Spirit Kata.

Other Bonuses: +4 to save vs poison. Trust/intimidate 65%.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Excellent quality Wang family Katana (3D6), Naginata (1D8).

Other Equipment: Numerous other weapons adorn the walls of his fortress home. Especially in his chamber where is his likely to be encountered. Cheng can use most of these weapons with expertise, from swords to staves to spears.

Average Sky Tree Security Guard

These are innocent men (and women) just trying to do their job and stop the unauthorized personnel from being where they shouldn't. They are panicked, inexperienced guards who will not realize the seriousness of the rooftop gunfight or the villains they are up against. They will try to stop the player characters but using deadly force against these security guards would be considered diabolical.

True Name: Varies.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Country of Origin: Varies.

Background: Varies.

Family Background: Varies.

Hit Points: 19, S.D.C.: 18.

Height: 5 feet, 8 inches tall (1.73 m). **Weight:** 175 pounds (79 kg).

Age: Varies.

Chi: 12

Attributes: I.Q. 8, M.A. 11, M.E. 10, P.S. 11, P.P. 13, P.E. 12, P.B. 8, Spd 11.

Disposition: Professional and courageous. They will fight so far as they can without risking certain death. The public's safety is paramount.

Experience Level: 2nd level Free Agent: Professional Free Agent O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Surveillance specialist, Bodyguard, Security specialist.

Primary Martial Art Form: Hand to Hand: Basic.

Attacks per Melee: 2

Combat Info: Kick, Body Block, Body Flip, Crush, Pin/Incapacitate, Pull Punch, Knockout/Stun, Critical Strike, W.P. Blunt (+1 to strike, +1 to parry).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +3 to parry and dodge, +4 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: None.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Nightstick (1D6).

Other Equipment: ID badges and security door passes.

Commodore Mathis

Father of Camille and fellow pigeon fancier and friend to Brigadier General Roth, Lawrence Mathis is a stereotypical British officer, a bit outdated, regally posh and the epitome of a stiff upper lip. He is always polite and friendly to acquaintances but has earned his position through ruthless strategy, skill and drive. He is an excellent motivator and is respected by the forces. Other than aircraft, his one passion is his homing and racing pigeons and his skills as a trainer are arguably the best in the world. He has beaten Brigadier General Roth in more than two thirds of their races. His strong-willed facade worked against his emotions when it was discovered that his only child, Camille, had been found guilty of international larceny and he cut all ties with her, making not one single contact in the last ten years. He has met the Jade Fan Lady once and she beat him viciously. He is not aware of her real identity. Knowing what his lack of support or love has reduced her to will take its toll on the sanity of the old man and is likely to cause the mental death of this war hero.

True Name: Commodore Lawrence Mathis.

Alignment: Unprincipled.

Country of Origin: U.K.

Background: Straight.

Family Background: Raised by parents.

Hit Points: 48, S.D.C.: 38.

Height: 5 feet, 11 inches tall (1.80 m). **Weight:** 180 pounds (81 kg).

Age: 52

Chi: 11

Attributes: I.Q. 16, M.A. 9, M.E. 10, P.S. 13, P.P. 11, P.E. 12, P.B. 9, Spd 13.

Disposition: Arrogant.

Experience Level: 10th level Mercenary: Academy Officer O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military, Advanced Military, Helicopter Aviation, Combat Aircraft, Intelligence, Advanced Pilot, Physical.

Primary Martial Art Form: Hand to Hand: Commando.

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Kick Attack: 1D6 damage, Critical Strike on Natural 19 or 20, Knockout/Stun on a Natural 18, 19, or 20, All military W.P.s as well as W.P. Pistol, W.P. Machine-Gun, W.P. Submachine-Gun.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +2 to strike, +5 to parry and dodge, +4 damage, +3 to pull punch, +7 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: None.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Carries a Defender revolver (3D6).

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

Doctor Bryant

Bryant is a brilliant mind in most scientific areas but is at the forefront of cybernetics. He is responsible for all of the cybernetic reconstruction of Lang's Delta Force team as well as Camille and the engineering of the aircraft magnet aboard the Nightingale. The doctor has grown increasingly detached from people during his work with the Wang Gar terrorists as his coping mechanism. Unfortunately, he is now totally detached and will think nothing of taking someone's life. He even has a laser beam fitted into his cybernetic eye in case he should ever be threatened! The player characters may deduce that he now wears a monocle over his other eye whereas all previous photographs of him will show him sporting a full pair of glasses.

True Name: Doctor Leonard Bryant.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Country of Origin: U.S.

Background: Defector.

Family Background: Only child.

Hit Points: 66, **S.D.C.:** 32.

Height: 5 feet, 7 inches tall (1.7 m). **Weight:** 150 pounds (68 kg).

Age: 54

Chi: 12

Attributes: I.Q. 22, M.A. 8, M.E. 13, P.S. 10, P.P. 11, P.E. 12, P.B. 7, Spd 11.

Disposition: Distracted by his work. Always busy. Reclusive and withdrawn, he talks to himself and talks little to others.

Experience Level: 10th level Gizmoteer: Gizoid Gizmoteer O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military Program, Cybernetics, Computer hacking, Microchip technology, Electronic communications.

Primary Martial Art Form: Hand to Hand: Basic.

Attacks per Melee: 5

Combat Info: Roll, Knife Hand, Power Punch, Kick Attack (1D8+2 damage), Snap Kick, Roundhouse Kick, Drop Kick, Jump Kick, Death Blow, Leap Attack, Body Block, Body Flip (1D6 damage), Knockout/Stun on Natural 20, Critical Strike on Natural 19 or 20, Critical Strike from behind. W.P. Automatic Pistol.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +2 to strike, +2 to parry and dodge, +4 to pull punch, +4 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: +9% to all skills.

Martial Art Powers: None.

Cybernetics: Internal medical monitor, jawbone microphone speaker. In addition to his O.C.C. implants, Bryant has a cybernetic attachment in the form of his right eye. He has built all available augmentations for it but usually has a mini-laser installed.

Weapons: Mini-laser eye (2D6) or a .45 Colt (4D6).

Other Equipment: Access to most electronics desired.

Liwei Chao (Financial Broker)

Chao is indeed a skilled accountant and understands the worldwide stock exchange. He has been a co-conspirator in Lang's plan to profit from the destruction of Wall Street and London's Old Town. But he is also one of the highest members of the Wang Gar clan and is always in Lang's presence, not as his bodyguard (in fact, he outranks Lang), but as a watchman for Cheng Wang. Lang must follow his plan through to the end (which he is doing)

else Liwei will implement his Ninjitsu insurance policy! He will not die for Lang or this cause (especially if Cheng Wang is dead) and will attempt to flee the Nightingale on his ninja hang glider. Where he flees to is anybody's guess, especially if the Nightingale is over the Atlantic at the time...

True Name: Liwei Chao.

Alignment: Diabolic.

Country of Origin: China.

Background: Straight.

Family Background: Abandoned by parents. Raised in Martial Arts clan.

Hit Points: 49, **S.D.C.:** 77.

Height: 6 feet, 1 inch tall (1.85 m). **Weight:** 182 pounds (82 kg).

Age: 44

Chi: 23

Attributes: I.Q. 15, M.A. 17, M.E. 13, P.S. 13, P.P. 20, P.E. 18, P.B. 14, Spd 17.

Disposition: Stern and serious. Quiet and reserved. Always controlled and speaks in a constant professional manner.

Experience Level: 6th level Martial Artist: Dedicated Martial Artist O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Maths, Literacy: Chinese.

Primary Martial Art Form: Ch'In-Na.

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Roll, Maintain Balance, Automatic Parry, Combination Parry/Attack, Disarm, Fingertip Attack, Claw Hand, Death Blow on Natural 20, Squeeze, Pin, Choke, Paralysis Attack (Vital Points), Arm Hold, Leg Hold, Neck Hold, Automatic Hold, Knockout/Stun on Natural 19 or 20, Knockout/Stun from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear (triple damage!).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +4 to strike, +7 to parry and dodge, +6 to damage, +4 to roll with impact, +1 to maintain balance.

Secondary Martial Art Form: Ninjitsu.

Attacks per Melee: 5

Combat Info: Leap, Back Flip, Cartwheel, Combination Parry/Attack, Knife Hand, Palm Strike, Kick Attack, Leg Hooks, Snap Kick, Drop Kick, Jump Kick, Death Blow, Leap Attack, Knockdown, Body Flip, Arm Hold, Leg Old, Body Hold, Neck Hold, Knockout/Stun on Natural 19 or 20, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike or Knockout from rear. W.P. Ninja Sword, W.P. Kusari-Gama, W.P. Paired.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +8 to initiative, +6 to strike, +8 to parry and dodge, +2 damage, +8 to roll with impact, +2 to Knockdown, +4 to leap (+12 feet/3.7 m), +4 to Back Flip.

Martial Art Powers: Art of Mystic Invisibility, Art of Stealth, Art of Hiding, Tamashiwara, Iai-Jutsu (Sword Drawing), Falling Technique, Stone Ox.

Other Bonuses: +2 vs poison. Trust/intimidate 50%.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Carries a set of paired Sai (1D6) and a Kusari-Gama (1D10) as well as two dozen Shurikens (1D4).

Other Equipment: Dresses in full business suit (you'll rarely see him garbed in an actual ninja outfit (unless in a sequel). Ninja gimmicks include climbing claws, eggshell bombs, a Kawanga, a Tetsubishi and a ninja hang glider (useful for escaping the Nightingale)!

Average Thief

These were originally created as an encounter at the Mathis house. I have included them as NPCs for use as generic henchmen for any members of SPECTRUM or similar.

True Name: Varies.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Country of Origin: Varies.

Background: Varies.

Family Background: Varies.

Hit Points: 28, S.D.C.: 26.

Height: 5 feet, 11 inches tall (1.80 m). **Weight:** 165 pounds (74 kg).

Age: Varies, mid-twenties.

Chi: 13

Attributes: I.Q. 12, M.A. 13, M.E. 8, P.S. 15, P.P. 15, P.E. 13, P.B. 9, Spd 14.

Disposition: Quiet and professional. Will flee if cover is not blown, otherwise will attempt to kill witnesses (players).

Experience Level: 3rd level Free Agent: Thief O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Thief, Locksmith & security, Surveillance, Explosives construction.

Primary Martial Art Form: Hand to Hand: Assassin.

Attacks per Melee: 3

Combat Info: Knife Hand, Fingertip Attack, Tripping Leg Hook, Body Block, Choke, Arm Hold, Body Hold, Neck Hold, Knockout/Stun, Critical Strike, Critical Strike from rear, Death Blow, W.P. Pistol, W.P. Dagger (+1 strike, +1 parry, +2 throw).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +2 to strike, +2 to parry and dodge, +5 to pull punch, +5 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: None.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Dagger (1D6), 9mm Model P5 Walther (2D6) with silencer!

Other Equipment: Concealed body armor (A.R. 12, S.D.C. 40), night sight goggles, ear mike radio, lock picks, grapple & line plus other burglary items.

Delta Force Team

Richard Lang

Anthony Roth Jr. was a highly regarded captain in the U.S. Air Force. When Dr. Leonard Bryant, a leading cybernetics scientist, was taken hostage by the underground Wang Gar clan in China, Roth's Delta Force team was the obvious choice for the rescue attempt. The mission went awry and the entire team was captured. Held for months and ransomed alongside the doctor, the team were subjected to the cruellest of tortures and body parts were removed and sent to the lead U.S. negotiator, Brigadier General Roth Sr. – Tony's father! Being the dutiful officer he is, he took the decision to not negotiate with the terrorists and an airstrike was sent to obliterate the clan, his son and his team with them.

The U.S. Air Force's intelligence was incorrect and most of the clan had moved locations before the strike, along with them the soldiers and Dr. Bryant. None of the clan truly know why the clan's leader, Cheng Wang, kept Roth's team alive but he did and their anger at the situation and the betrayal that they felt at the

hands of their country grew into bitter anguish. After months of imprisonment, a Stockholm syndrome began to develop between the Delta Force team and the Wang Gar clan. Cheng Wang saw some leadership qualities and resilience in Roth that was missing from the clan's likely successors and the two bonded. Eventually, the soldiers were indoctrinated as part of the Wang Gar and they began to scheme a plot for revenge and profit.

Dr. Bryant was allowed to augment the team and cybernetically rebuild their broken bodies into powerhouses and shadows of their former selves. Roth even chose facial reconstruction and a new identity to get close to his father and mingle in the underworld, reborn as Richard Lang, millionaire realtor! It was by accident that Lang discovered the imprisonment of his former childhood friend, Camille Mathis and her fate in a Chinese prison; left to rot, abandoned by her own father. Being in such a similar plight to his own, he sought her out and persuaded her to join in his scheme. Scarred by her experiences over the last several years, she agreed and underwent cybernetic surgery herself. Now, using the resources and funding of the Wang Gar clan, Lang, true to his plan, aims to unleash *Operation: As the Crow Flies* and profit from bold investments prior to cataclysmic events at the heart of the U.K. and U.S. financial and espionage holdings.

Roth's new alter ego is a strange play for him and although he has spent years acting the role (a role that is now psychologically almost his real identity), he struggled to define the sincere charm and wit of the character he was hoping to portray. As such, Lang can come across a little sleazy and a bit arrogant. He will act charming but there is an undercurrent of distrust. Otherwise, the new identity is nearly perfect, right down to some fingerprints.

True Name: Captain Anthony "Tony" Roth II.

Alignment: Diabolic.

Country of Origin: U.S.

Background: Alignment Change (good to bad).

Family Background: Raised by parents.

Hit Points: 30, S.D.C.: 46.

Height: 6 feet tall (1.83 m). **Weight:** 220 pounds (99 kg).

Age: 34

Chi: 12

Attributes: I.Q. 13, M.A. 13, M.E. 11, P.S. 14, P.P. 16, P.E. 12, P.B. 9, Spd 14.

Disposition: Confident but comes across slightly sleazy.

Experience Level: 7th level Mercenary: Cyborg; Man Machine O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military, Combat Aircraft, Intelligence, Oriental.

Primary Martial Art Form: Hand to Hand: Martial Arts.

Attacks per Melee: 5

Combat Info: Knife Hand, Power Punch, Kick Attack: 1D8+2 damage, Snap Kick, Roundhouse Kick, Drop Kick, Jump Kick, Death Blow, Leap Attack, Body Block, Body Flip, Knockout/Stun, Critical Strike, Critical Strike from rear, Knockout/Stun on a Natural 20, W.P. Pistol among other military & modern W.P.s (G.M.'s choice).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +3 to strike, +6 to parry and dodge, +18 damage, +4 to pull punch, +7 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: None.

Cybernetics: Full Cranial Damage: Both eyes with all augmentation options; Left Hand: Realistic hand, external attachment

hand; all cyber-disguises except fingertip silicon (although his left realistic hand shows the fingerprints belonging to only Richard Lang); built-in scrambler, built-in radio jawbone implants.

Weapons: 9mm Model 951 Semi P, Full Auto Beretta (2D6).

Other Equipment: Side holster for pistol, Tony Roth dog tags.

Talon

Wes is a demolitions expert and now Lang's personal bodyguard for the charity weekend. He is also part of the escape plan for the Tokyo Skytree part of *Operation: New Clothes*.

True Name: Wesley "Wes" Johnson.

Alignment: Diabolic.

Country of Origin: U.S.

Background: Alignment Change (good to bad).

Family Background: Twin.

Hit Points: 36, **S.D.C.:** 33.

Height: 6 feet, 5 inches tall (1.96 m). **Weight:** 278 pounds (125 kg).

Age: 30

Chi: 62

Attributes: I.Q. 8, M.A. 9, M.E. 9, P.S. 19, P.P. 16, P.E. 16, P.B. 8, Spd 9.

Disposition: Serious and stern. Very aggressive.

Experience Level: 5th level Mercenary: Cyborg O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military, Combat Aircraft, Advanced Infantry, Mechanical.

Primary Martial Art Form: Tai-Chi Ch'uan.

Attacks per Melee: 3

Combat Info: Multiple Dodge, Automatic Dodge, Backhand, Push Open Hand (special), Palm Strike, Kick, Snap Kick, Crescent Kick, Pull Punch, Knockout/Stun, Critical Strike 19 or 20, Knockout from behind, W.P. Automatic Rifle among other military & modern W.P.s (G.M.'s choice).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +1 to strike, +6 to parry and dodge, +4 damage, +7 to roll with impact, +2 to maintain balance.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: Find Weakness, One Finger Chi, "Warrior Spirit" Kata, "Windmill Kata."

Cybernetics: Right & Left Hands: Both are base hands with detachable fingers. All fingers are grenade finger joints (3D6) or gas finger joints. Other replacements and augmentations can be implemented by the G.M.

Weapons: M-16 Automatic Rifle (4D6) with mounted 40mm grenade launcher. 10 explosive grenades (2D4x10).

Other Equipment: Plastic explosives and fuses.

Mo

Musclebound and angry. Mo (named after his new cybernetic Mohawk) is an uncontrollable fighter who loves his new cranial weapon and will use it of break anything or anyone that threatens the mission.

True Name: Kyle Jacobs.

Alignment: Miscreant.

Country of Origin: U.S.

Background: Traumatized.

Family Background: Raised by parents.

Hit Points: 37, **S.D.C.:** 80.

Height: 6 feet, 3 inches tall (1.91 m). **Weight:** 285 pounds (128 kg).

Age: 28

Chi: 18

Attributes: I.Q. 8, M.A. 12, M.E. 10, P.S. 22, P.P. 14, P.E. 18, P.B. 7, Spd 7.

Disposition: Cocky.

Experience Level: 4th level Mercenary: Cyborg O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military, Combat Aircraft, Helicopter Aviation, Communications.

Primary Martial Art Form: T'ang-Su Karate.

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Multiple Dodge, Power Block/Parry, Disarm, Power Punch, Backhand, Duo-Fist Strike, Kick, Snap Kick, Roundhouse Kick, Axe Kick, Reverse Turning Kick, Jump Kick, Flying Jump Kick, Death Blow, Leap Attack, Combination Strike/Parry, Combination Grab/Head Bash (extra damage), Pull Punch, Knockout/Stun, Critical Strike, Critical Strike or Knockout from Behind, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, W.P. Automatic Rifle among other military & modern W.P.s (G.M.'s choice).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +3 to strike, +4 to parry and dodge, +8 damage, +7 to roll with impact.

Martial Art Powers: Stone Ox, Dam Sum Sing, Falling Technique, Tamashiwara (Board Breaking).

Other Bonuses: +15% to save vs coma, +2 to save vs poison.

Cybernetics: Special: Cranium. The top section of the skull has been replaced. A thin, sharp blade extends the length of his cranium. A head butt will do 3D6 + P.S. bonus damage. Cyber-disguises: Eyelid compression device (used to extend the brow and keep the blood out of his eyes), Adjustable hair follicles (used in a Mohawk style to disguise the blade at all times)!

Weapons: M-16 Automatic rifle (4D6).

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

Angelo

Gaz is still the ace pilot of the team. He is the only one who knows the ins and outs of the Nightingale and also wields the skills to utilize them. He helped engineer the flying carrier and it his baby. If he is about to die he will destroy the controls to the Nightingale (see his cybernetics). He also uses his cybernetics for a lot of the Nightingale's controls so a normal pilot's array is not used for this aircraft.

True Name: Gareth "Gaz" Bianco.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Country of Origin: U.S.

Background: Traumatized.

Family Background: Raised by parents.

Hit Points: 44, **S.D.C.:** 29.

Height: 5 feet, 9 inches tall (1.75 m). **Weight:** 195 pounds (88 kg).

Age: 25

Chi: 19

Attributes: I.Q. 14, M.A. 7, M.E. 13, P.S. 12, P.P. 16, P.E. 19, P.B. 7, Spd 15.

Disposition: Paranoid, worrywart but confident in his commanding office (Lang).

Experience Level: 6th level Mercenary: Cyborg; Man Machine O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military, Combat Aircraft, Electronic Warfare, Advanced Pilot.

Primary Martial Art Form: Hand to Hand: Martial Arts.

Attacks per Melee: 5

Combat Info: Knife Hand, Power Punch, Kick Attack: 1D8+2 damage, Snap Kick, Roundhouse Kick, Drop Kick, Jump Kick, Death Blow, Leap Attack, Body Block, Body Flip, Knockout/Stun, Critical Strike, Critical Strike from rear, most military & modern W.P.s (G.M.'s choice).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +3 to strike, +6 to parry and dodge, +18 damage, +4 to pull punch, +7 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: +20% to save vs coma, +2 to save vs poison.

Martial Art Powers: None.

Cybernetics: Full Cranial Damage: Both eyes with all augmentation options; Left Hand: Realistic hand, Neural interface hand; All cyber-disguises except fingertip silicon; All jaw-bone implants.

Weapons: Only those on Nightingale or his laser eye. If near death, Angelo will use his grenade eye to self destruct and blow up the Nightingale's controls!

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

Goldie

Named after his chosen eagle style, he enjoys the look of terror in his opponent's eyes when he displays his claws and moves into fighting stance...

True Name: Riley Carmichael.

Alignment: Miscreant.

Country of Origin: U.S.

Background: Traumatized.

Family Background: Orphaned. Raised in institutes.

Hit Points: 36, S.D.C.: 38.

Height: 6 feet tall (1.83 m). **Weight:** 268 pounds (121 kg).

Age: 26

Chi: 25

Attributes: I.Q. 10, M.A. 16, M.E. 12, P.S. 16, P.P. 14, P.E. 15, P.B. 10, Spd 11.

Disposition: Reckless adrenaline seeker.

Experience Level: 4th level Mercenary: Cyborg O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military, Combat Aircraft, Helicopter Aviation, Oriental.

Primary Martial Art Form: Xing Chaio (Eagle Claw Kung Fu).

Attacks per Melee: 5

Combat Info: Leap, Back Flip, Somersault, Handstand, Cartwheel, Roll, Eagle Claw Hand (Special; 2D6 once per melee), Kick, Crescent Kick, Wheel Kick, Axe Kick, Jump Kick, Flying Jump Kick, Deathblow, Leap Attack, Elbow, Pull Punch, Knockout/Stun, Critical Strike or Knockout from behind, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, W.P. Automatic Rifle among other military & modern W.P.s (G.M.'s choice).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +3 to strike, +6 to parry, +3 to dodge, +1 damage, +3 Back Flip, +2 handstand/cartwheel, +2 to leap, +6 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: +5% to save vs coma, +1 to save vs poison. Trust/intimidate 45%.

Martial Art Powers: Kaijutsu (Yell), Iai-Jutsu (+6 initiative to draw sword/claws), "Fortress Penetration" Kata.

Cybernetics: Both hands have been replaced by claw hands (2D6 + P.S. bonus damage). Other replacements and augmentations can be implemented by the G.M.

Weapons: M-16 Automatic rifle (4D6).

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

Dax

The joker of the group, he is often referred to as "his royal highness" (Mike King = My King) but is codenamed Dax as he jokes he has the biggest wingspan and is more of a Terror-Dactyl (Pterodactyl) than any bird. His jokes may be bad but his disposition is maniacally evil. He operates as security at the neodymium mine and is a borderline insane, cold-blooded killer. Unfortunately, he has the guns to back up his behavior.

True Name: Michael "Mike" King.

Alignment: Diabolic.

Country of Origin: U.S.

Background: Alignment Change (good to bad).

Family Background: Raised by parents.

Hit Points: 42, S.D.C.: 52.

Height: 6 feet, 6 inches tall (1.98 m). **Weight:** 310 pounds (140 kg). Pure muscle!

Age: 31

Chi: 19

Attributes: I.Q. 9, M.A. 20, M.E. 7, P.S. 22/30, P.P. 187, P.E. 19, P.B. 6, Spd 8.

Disposition: Arrogant to the extreme. Loves to show off his "Big guns" (the arms as well as the actual guns).

Experience Level: 5th level Mercenary: Cyborg; Man Machine O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military, Combat Aircraft, Guerrilla Warfare, Physical.

Primary Martial Art Form: Hand to Hand: Martial Arts.

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Knife Hand, Power Punch, Kick Attack: 1D8+2 damage, Snap Kick, Roundhouse Kick, Drop Kick, Jump Kick, Death Blow, Leap Attack, Body Block, Body Flip, Knockout/Stun, Critical Strike, Critical Strike from rear, W.P. Machine-Gun among other military & modern W.P.s (G.M.'s choice).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +4 to strike, +7 to parry and dodge, +15 damage, +4 to pull punch, +7 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: +20% to save vs coma, +3 to save vs poison. Trust/Intimidate 65%.

Martial Art Powers: None.

Cybernetics: Massive body trunk damage; both arms and hands. Both are motorized and with P.S. 30 and 250 S.D.C. (Dax often uses his arms to wield two heavy machine-guns at once, as well as to shield himself from gunfire or blasts!), cybernetic right eye: telescopic sight, night sight, infrared. Lung implant: Toxic Filter, oxygen storage cell (used to smoke out the miners), eyelid compression device. Other replacements and augmentations can be implemented by the G.M.

Weapons: Two 7.62mm light machine-guns (5D6) which he fires one in each hand!

Other Equipment: Master keys to the mine as well as a basic map.

Barrack

His favorite combat move is to lift the victim high into the air with his cybernetic left arm and choke them. He is good friends with Tanner.

True Name: Henry “Hank” Daniels.

Alignment: Miscreant.

Country of Origin: U.S.

Background: Alignment Change (good to bad).

Family Background: Only child.

Hit Points: 31, **S.D.C.:** 81.

Height: 6 feet, 6 inches tall (1.98 m). **Weight:** 255 pounds (115 kg).

Age: 27

Chi: 13

Attributes: I.Q. 11, M.A. 14, M.E. 13, P.S. 12, P.P. 16, P.E. 13, P.B. 14, Spd 17.

Disposition: Nice guy, friendly. But has no conscience when it comes to executing the will of his commanding officer.

Experience Level: 4th level Mercenary: Cyborg O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military, Combat Aircraft, Intelligence, Language.

Primary Martial Art Form: Fong Ngan Kung Fu (Phoenix Eye).

Attacks per Melee: 6

Combat Info: Back Flip, Leap, Combination Parry/Attack, Power Block/Parry, Disarm, Knife Hand, Force-Knuckle Fist, Double Knuckle Fist, Backhand, Fingertip Attack, Palm Strike, Snap Kick, Death Blow, Body Block, Crush, Combination Strike/Parry, Knee, Elbow, One Hand Choke (Special! – a favorite of Barrack’s), Arm Hold, Neck Hold, Knockout/Stun, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike or Knockout from behind, W.P. Submachine-Gun among other military & modern W.P.s (G.M.’s choice).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +4 to strike, +4 to strike with all kicks, +4 to parry and dodge, +2 damage (+15 damage with bionic left leg), +1 to Leap, +7 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: Stone Ox, Kangeiko & Shochu Geiko, Kick Practice, Tamashiwara.

Cybernetics: Left arm & hand: Realistic arm & hand with a P.S. of 30! Left leg & foot: Extra strength: P.S. 30 (+15 damage with any strike with this leg!), extra speed: Spd 17. Leg has container for his submachine-gun. Other replacements and augmentations can be implemented by the G.M.

Weapons: 9mm mini-Uzi submachine-gun (2D6).

Other Equipment: Keys to Commodore Mathis’ handcuffs.

Tanner

Heavy weapons specialist and close friends with Barrack, he gets his nickname from the flamethrower installed down his right side. The fuel canister is located in the right leg and although it does not have much S.D.C., its high A.R. will take a good shot to hit it. Of course, if Tanner has already begun setting the place on fire (a usual stunt as the smoke does not affect him), the moment his leg starts leaking Chuck may be seconds away from exploding!

True Name: Charles “Chuck” Redman.

Alignment: Diabolic.

Country of Origin: U.S.

Background: Traumatized.

Family Background: Orphaned. Raised in institutes.

Hit Points: 41, **S.D.C.:** 85.

Height: 6 feet tall (1.83 m). **Weight:** 271 pounds (122 kg).

Age: 28

Chi: 20

Attributes: I.Q. 8, M.A. 16, M.E. 6, P.S. 14, P.P. 19, P.E. 20, P.B. 10, Spd 10.

Disposition: Slightly maniacal. Has no qualms about using his flamethrower regardless of the absurdity of the current environment (such as a high level apartment!).

Experience Level: 4th level Mercenary: Cyborg O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military, Combat Aircraft, Armor & Artillery, Advanced Pilot.

Primary Martial Art Form: Fong Ngan Kung Fu (Phoenix Eye).

Attacks per Melee: 6

Combat Info: Back Flip, Leap, Combination Parry/Attack, Power Block/Parry, Disarm, Knife Hand, Force-Knuckle Fist, Double Knuckle Fist, Backhand, Fingertip Attack, Palm Strike, Snap Kick, Death Blow, Body Block, Crush, Combination Strike/Parry, Knee, Elbow, One Hand Choke (Special!), Arm Hold, Neck Hold, Knockout/Stun, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike or Knockout from behind, W.P. Flamethrower among other military & modern W.P.s (G.M.’s choice).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +5 to initiative, +5 to strike, +5 to parry and dodge, +2 to damage, +1 to Leap, +7 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: +25% to save vs coma, +3 to save vs poison. Trust/intimidate 45%.

Martial Art Powers: Stone Ox, Kangeiko & Shochu Geiko, Falling Technique, Iai-Jutsu (Sword Drawing).

Cybernetics: Lung implant: toxic filter. Right Arm & Hand: Realistic arm & hand. Removal of the realistic hand reveals a flamethrower nozzle which is connected to the gas tank in his leg. Right leg & foot: Container leg filled with gasoline. A.R. 18 but only 50 S.D.C. Other replacements and augmentations can be implemented by the G.M.

Weapons: None, relies on his internal flamethrower (5D10, 60% chance of setting the surroundings alight).

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

Spectrum Investors

The details on these investors have been left quite sparingly so that G.M.s may weave their own plot lines around any intended sequels. Of course the information surrounding them is sparse – they are international crime lords!

At the end of the adventure as written, there is a good chance that Nate Bailey (and Vinnie), as well as probably one or two others, may be dead or in custody. But, the story of the mysterious Mr. Violet has yet to conclude. Did Liwei Chao escape on his ninja hang-glider? Or did any other villains survive to fight another day? The intention of the unique bodyguards are to allow for a climactic fight (and win) but enable a returning villain for a sequel. Was it more enjoyable watching Bond fight Jaws or Blofeld?

Africa

Mr. Orange: Colonel Hatari Nangwaya (political espionage).
Bodyguard: Kamau.

Asia

Mr. Blue: Xing Yauzo (WUSHU organization – into everything black market).
Bodyguard: Yokozuna.

South America

Mr. Indigo: Antonio Rodriguez (narcotics dealer).
Bodyguard: Tori Santiago.

North America

Mr. Red: Duke Williams (arms dealer).
Bodyguard: Leon Carter.

Australasia

Mr. Green: Nate Bailey (blackmailer).
Bodyguard: Vinnie Vango.

Europe

Mr. Yellow: Lord Chester Middleton (thievery – especially rigged gambling).
Bodyguard: Reeves.

Antarctica

The mysterious candidate known only as Mr. Violet declined the offer and even hired the Mui-Fa assassin to kill Lang!

Africa – Mr. Orange

Colonel Hatari Nangwaya

A true Colonel in the Central African military, he is a well known presence in the African political world. What is little known to the outside forces are his portfolio of (yet unproven) espionage deals and funding of political coups and various assassinations. An unrestrained force in Africa's future politics, he rules with fear and plays on rumors of being some sort of witch doctor!

True Name: Hatari Nangwaya.

Alignment: Diabolic.

Country of Origin: Central Africa.

Background: Straight.

Family Background: Raised by wealthy parents.

Hit Points: 46, **S.D.C.:** 49.

Height: 5 feet, 8 inches tall (1.73 m). **Weight:** 165 pounds (74 kg).

Age: 47

Chi: 48

Attributes: I.Q. 10, M.A. 23, M.E. 9, P.S. 16, P.P. 18, P.E. 14, P.B. 8, Spd 12.

Disposition: Serious and aggressive. Has a fearsome passion for his desires which is displayed in all speech and actions.

Experience Level: 7th level Mercenary: Veteran Grunt O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military Program, Intelligence, Electronic Warfare, Guerrilla warfare, Cultural.

Primary Martial Art Form: Yu-Sool.

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Back Flip, Multiple Dodge, Combination Parry/Attack, Disarm, Backhand, Palm Strike, Kick Attack, Death Blow, Body Block, Automatic Flip/Throw (2D6), Critical Flip/Throw, Crush/Squeeze, Choke, Combination Grab/Kick, Paralysis (Vital Points), Automatic Arm Lock, Knockout/Stun on Natural 19 or 20, Knockout/Stun from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear, most modern and military W.P.s.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +1 to strike, +4 to parry and dodge, +2 to damage, +1 to Back Flip, +2 to Body Flip/Throw, +3 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: Trust/intimidate 80%.

Martial Art Powers: Body Chi, Hardened Chi, Soft Chi, Find Weakness, One Finger Chi.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Carries only a small firearm on his person (varies). Relies on his Chi mastery and his bodyguards, especially Kamau.

Other Equipment: Bulletproof Point Blank Vest, A.R.: 10, S.D.C.: 70.

Kamau

Little is known of the Colonel's giant of a bodyguard and he would never tell you any details himself. Kamau never speaks, even under torture, and it is believed not even Nangwaya knows his real identity. He is always dressed smartly, usually in expensive business suits, but always remains barefooted!

True Name: Unknown.

Alignment: Miscreant.

Country of Origin: Ethiopia.

Background: Formerly Insane.

Family Background: Orphaned. Raised in poverty.

Hit Points: 54, **S.D.C.:** 109.

Height: 6 feet, 8 inches tall (2.03 m). **Weight:** 303 pounds (136 kg). Pure muscle!

Age: 35

Chi: 20

Attributes: I.Q. 6, M.A. 24, M.E. 6, P.S. 28, P.P. 20, P.E. 20, P.B. 6, Spd 10.

Disposition: Uncomfortably cold and emotionless at all times.

Experience Level: 7th level Martial Artist: Worldly Martial Artist O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Math, Literacy: Oromo, Literacy: English.

Primary Martial Art Form: Thai Kick Boxing.

Attacks per Melee: 9

Combat Info: Maintain Balance, Multiple Dodge, Combination Parry/Attack, Break Fall, Power Punch, Backhand, Palm Strike, Kick Attack, Tripping Leg Hook, Snap Kick, Roundhouse Kick, Crescent Kick, Backward Sweep, Reverse Turning Kick, Drop Kick, Shin Kick (special – 1D6 to H.P.!), Jump Kick, Death Blow, Leap Attack, Combination Strike/Parry, Combination Grab/Knee, Knee, Elbow, Forearm, Knockout/Stun on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Knockout/Stun from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +9 to strike (+13 with kicks), +9 to parry, +7 to dodge, +15 damage, +4 to roll with impact, +4 to maintain balance.

Other Bonuses: +3 to save vs poison. Trust/intimidate 84%.

Martial Art Powers: Special *Lightning Form* Kata! Kick Chagi, Chi Gung (A.R. 17), Stone Ox.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: None.

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

Asia – Mr. Blue

Xing Yauzo

The youngest of the Yauzo family and rising member of the WUSHU (Worldwide, Underground, Sinister, Hierarchical Union) who have their hand in every criminal activity in Asia. Known within the organization as “Green Eagle,” it is unknown what rank this holds but it is sure that his family ties grant him more power than any title. At such a young age, this freakishly evil child uses swords to impale the WUSHU’s enemies as he lacks the strength to fight with his fists.

True Name: Xing Yauzo.

Alignment: Aberrant.

Country of Origin: China.

Background: Straight.

Family Background: Raised by parents to take over the family business.

Hit Points: 26, **S.D.C.:** 34.

Height: 4 feet, 6 inches tall (1.37 m). **Weight:** 100 pounds (45 kg).

Age: 12

Chi: 11

Attributes: I.Q. 18, M.A. 6, M.E. 7, P.S. 8, P.P. 13, P.E. 11, P.B. 12, Spd 15.

Disposition: Xing has the strict demeanor of a businesslike professional. An eerily unchildlike character.

Experience Level: 3rd level Gizmoteer: Dreamer Gizmoteer O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Electronic Communication, Computer Hacking, Telephone Hacking, Oriental Studies, Medical Doctor!

Primary Martial Art Form: Wu Shu T’sung.

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Maintain Balance, Leap, Back Flip, Somersault, Handstand, Cartwheel, Multiple Dodge, Disarm, Automatic Roll, Breakfall, Knifehand, Fore-Knuckle Fist, Double-Knuckle Fist, Power Punch, Backhand, Palm Strike, Kick Attack, Tripping/Leg Hooks, Snap Kick, Crescent Kick, Wheel Kick, Axe Kick, Jump Kick, Death Blow, Leap Attack, Elbow, Arm Hold, Body Hold, Elbow Lock, Knockout/Stun on Natural 20, Knockout/Stun from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear, W.P. Scimitar (+2 strike, +1 parry, +1 throw), W.P. Broadsword (+2 strike, +2 parry), W.P. Dagger (+1 strike, +1 parry, +1 throw), W.P. Paired swords, W.P. Paired broadswords, Mao’s Pride Kata (special!).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +4 to parry and dodge, +4 to roll with impact, +1 to leap, +2 to Back Flip.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: Mystic Invisibility, Bassai Kata.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Prefers Oriental daggers (1D6) as these are easier for his young hands to grip. Carries a scimitar (1D6) with him but will wield paired broadswords (2D6) if he is knowingly going into a battle.

Other Equipment: Wears a hidden, green jade medallion of an eagle. Always carries the latest tablet & smartphone (which he’s improved).

Yokozuna

Known only by his alias of Yokozuna (title name for Grand Champion in sumo), this waddling free agent is the ultimate powerhouse and a force to be reckoned with. He is the perfect choice as bodyguard for the young crime lord and serves the Yauzo family faithfully. It is rumored that he may owe the family some sort of life debt.

True Name: Unknown.

Alignment: Miscreant.

Country of Origin: Japan.

Background: Driven. Owes the Yauzo family an unpaid debt.

Family Background: Raised by mother. Father unknown.

Hit Points: 49, **S.D.C.:** 133.

Height: 6 feet, 2 inches tall (1.88 m). **Weight:** 606 pounds (273 kg)!

Age: 32

Chi: 17

Attributes: I.Q. 12, M.A. 19, M.E. 9, P.S. 39, P.P. 8, P.E. 12, P.B. 8, Spd 8.

Disposition: Quiet and reserved until he fights. Then an unexpected amount of heinous trash talking begins, all in Japanese.

Experience Level: 7th level Free Agent: Wandering Free Agent O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Oriental Culture, Cultural, Physical, Bodyguard, Intelligence, Security Systems.

Primary Martial Art Form: Sumo (Wrestling).

Attacks per Melee: 3

Combat Info: Maintain Balance, Leap, Power Block/Parry (does damage!), Disarm, Automatic Roll, Breakfall, Power Punch, Backhand, Palm Strike, Body Block, Automatic Flip/Throw (2D6), Critical Flip/Throw, Crush/Squeeze, Pin, Choke, Forearm, Automatic Arm Hold, Body Hold, Neck Hold, Critical Strike on Natural 19 or 20.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +2 to strike, +6 to parry, +3 to dodge, +28 damage, +4 to roll with impact, +6 to maintain balance, +4 Body Flip/Throw.

Other Bonuses: Trust/intimidate 60%.

Martial Art Powers: Iron Hand, Wrist Hardening, Dam Sum Sing.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Crush/squeeze.

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

South America – Mr. Indigo

Antonio Rodriguez

Colombian narcotics dealer and drug lord extraordinaire! The only thing Rodriguez is more obsessed with other than making a profit are his looks and having women drool at his charm. He certainly has no ethics or principles when distributing his latest batch of street-ready concoctions. He is the epitome of selfishness but does not like to get his own hands dirty.

True Name: Antonio Rodriguez.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Country of Origin: Colombia.

Background: Hunted by Colombian government.
Family Background: Raised by poverty-stricken parents.
Hit Points: 52, S.D.C.: 58.
Height: 5 feet, 10 inches tall (1.78 m). **Weight:** 174 pounds (78 kg).
Age: 29
Chi: 56
Attributes: I.Q. 13, M.A. 17, M.E. 9, P.S. 18, P.P. 18, P.E. 18, P.B. 23, Spd 18.
Disposition: Smooth and seductive with the ladies. Slightly aloof and disregarding of others when in the company of a beautiful woman. Quite the unprofessional which is where Tori steps in...
Experience Level: 6th level Free Agent: Wandering Free Agent O.C.C.
Skill Programs: Oriental Culture, Romance Languages, Science, Deep Cover, Intelligence, Containment Fabricating.
Primary Martial Art Form: Lee Kwan Choo (non-violent).
Attacks per Melee: 3
Combat Info: Leap, Multiple Dodge, Circular Parry, Disarm, Duo-Knuckle Strike (Special – shock/stun!), Snap Kick (Special – shock/stun!). W.P. Pistol, W.P. Rifle, W.P. Submachine-Gun.
Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +7 to initiative, +6 to strike, +9 to parry and dodge, +3 damage, +7 to roll with impact, +5 to leap.
Other Bonuses: +2 to save vs poison. Trust/intimidate 50%. Charm/Impress 74%.
Martial Art Powers: Chi Gung (A.R. 17), Kangeiko & Shochu Geiko, Calm Minds, Iai-Jutsu.
Cybernetics: None.
Weapons: Ingram model 10 submachine-gun (4D6).
Other Equipment: The latest technology in everything.

Tori Santiago

Unlike her client, Antonio Rodriguez, she is on the job every second of the day. She is a manipulative and deadly assassin and demands the real respect behind Rodriguez's empire. But, she would never challenge him for full control as she has no yearning to be the number one target for other rivals and currently has all the power she desires. She is known as "Purgatory" in some circles.

True Name: Tori Santiago.
A.k.a.: Purga-Tori.
Alignment: Diabolic.
Country of Origin: Cuba.
Background: Traumatized by undisclosed incident.
Family Background: Raised by father.
Hit Points: 50, S.D.C.: 81.
Height: 5 feet, 10 inches tall (1.78 m). **Weight:** 130 pounds (59 kg).
Age: 26
Chi: 25
Attributes: I.Q. 17, M.A. 20, M.E. 14, P.S. 13, P.P. 19, P.E. 15, P.B. 17, Spd 22.
Disposition: Calm, controlled, calculating but indiscriminately callous. She earns respect through violence but treats respect and obedience with a consistent level of trust. Woe betide anyone who breaks that trust.

Experience Level: 7th level Martial Artist: Worldly Martial Artist O.C.C.
Skill Programs: Romance Languages, Physical.
Primary Martial Art Form: Wui Wing Chun.
Attacks per Melee: 6
Combat Info: Knife Hand, Power Punch, Kick Attack, Snap Kick, Roundhouse Kick, Drop Kick, Jump Kick, Death Blow, Leap Attack, Body Block, Body Flip, Knockout/Stun on Natural 19 or 20, Knockout/Stun from rear, Critical Strike on a Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear, Paired Weapons (butterfly knives only), W.P. Short Sword; butterfly knives are considered swords (+3 strike, +3 parry, +2 throw), W.P. Naginata; Spear (+4 strike, +4 parry, +4 throw).
Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +7 to initiative, +5 to strike, +8 to parry and dodge, +1 damage, +6 to roll with impact.
Martial Art Powers: Falling Technique; Kaijutsu (Yell); One Life, One Shot, One Hit, One Kill; Tamashiwara; Iai-Jutsu.
Secondary Martial Art Form: Fong Ngan Kung Fu (Phoenix Eye).

Attacks per Melee: 7
Combat Info: Back Flip, Leap, Combination Parry/Attack, Power Block/Parry, Disarm, Knife Hand, Fore-Knuckle Fist, Double Knuckle Fist, Backhand, Fingertip Attack, Palm Strike, Snap Kick, Death Blow, Body Block/Tackle, Crush/Squeeze, Combination Strike/Parry, Knee, Elbow, One Hand Choke (special!), Arm Hold, Neck Hold, Knockout/Stun, Knockout/Stun from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear.
Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +7 to initiative, +5 to strike, +5 to parry and dodge, +4 damage, +4 to roll with impact, +2 to maintain balance, +1 to Leap, +1 to Back Flip.
Other Bonuses: Trust/intimidate 65%. Charm/impress 45%.
Martial Art Powers: Falling Technique, Kaijutsu (Yell), One Life, One Shot, One Hit, One Kill, Tamashiwara, Iai-Jutsu (yes, Tori has exactly the same martial art powers with both forms).
Cybernetics: None.
Weapons: Butterfly knives (1D6+1), carries a revolver on occasion.
Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

North America – Mr. Red

Duke Williams

"There's a snake in my boots (and quick-release guns!)."

An indulgent arms dealer and Texan rancher. A typical cowboy who loves his firearms. "JW" or Duke as he's known, generally appears jovial and in high spirits but his temper will turn quickly into the vile snake he really is. He only has two expressions – a smile or a snarl.

True Name: John Wayne "JW" Williams.
A.k.a.: Duke, JW.
Alignment: Diabolic.
Country of Origin: U.S.A. (Texas).
Background: Traumatized by death of his parents.
Family Background: Orphaned. Begrudgingly raised by uncle.
Hit Points: 54, S.D.C.: 45.

Height: 5 feet, 7 inches tall (1.70 m). **Weight:** 148 pounds (67 kg).

Age: 42

Chi: 30

Attributes: I.Q. 17, M.A. 9, M.E. 14, P.S. 15, P.P. 17, P.E. 15, P.B. 10, Spd 12.

Disposition: Gives off an instant impression that he is much dumber than he actually is and likes to play down his ruthlessness. But, he can quickly turn and bite, just like his snake totem.

Experience Level: 7th level Gizmoteer: Dreamer Gizmoteer O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Weapon construction, Containment fabricating, Explosives construction, Advanced Infantry, Science.

Primary Martial Art Form: Snake Style Kung Fu.

Attacks per Melee: 3

Combat Info: Multiple Dodge, Combination Parry/Attack, One Finger Attack (special!), Palm Strike, Death Blow on a Natural 20, Choke, Knockout/Stun, Knockout/Stun from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear, All modern W.P.s.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +2 to strike, +4 to parry and dodge, +1 damage, +3 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: Art of Stealth, Art of Hiding, Art of Vanishing, Art of Escape, Calm Minds, Karumi-Jutsu, Vibrating Palm.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Duke carries a back-firing H&R Defender revolver (2D6) in a belt holster on his person at most occasions. His main gimmick are his paired, spring-release, .38 No. 2 Pistol revolvers (3D6) that eject from compartments hidden in his boots into his hands in an unexpected quick-draw fashion! Watch his nemeses shoot themselves with his own gun after thinking they've disarmed him, only for him to eject his pistols and finish them off! As an arms dealer, Williams has access to all manner of black market weaponry, including some experimental laser rifles.

Other Equipment: Chewing tobacco.

Leon Carter

Leon lost his father young and was "raised" by his drug-addicted mother who ran with an outlawed motorcycle gang. He was raised into the gang and grew up to be a twisted individual with almost zero morals. It is believed that his ties to Williams are purely financial. His lifestyle has given him a similar skill set to a Veteran grunt O.C.C. equivalent.

True Name: Leon Carter.

A.k.a.: The Bandit.

Alignment: Diabolic.

Country of Origin: U.S.A.

Background: Former addict/alcoholic.

Family Background: Raised by mother.

Hit Points: 33, S.D.C.: 80.

Height: 6 feet, 4 inches tall (1.93 m). **Weight:** 199 pounds (90 kg).

Age: 22

Chi: 18

Attributes: I.Q. 8, M.A. 18, M.E. 6, P.S. 20, P.P. 19, P.E. 18, P.B. 7, Spd 9.

Disposition: Bitter, vengeful and easily antagonized. He is obedient to his current employer (in this case, Duke Williams).

Experience Level: 4th level Mercenary: Veteran Grunt O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military Program, Advanced Infantry, Guerilla Warfare, Armor & Artillery, Bodyguard/Assassin, Mechanical.

Primary Martial Art Form: T'ang-Su Karate.

Attacks per Melee: 5

Combat Info: Multiple Dodge, Power Block/Parry, Disarm, Power Punch, Backhand, Duo-Fist Strike, Kick Attack, Snap Kick, Roundhouse Kick, Axe Kick, Reverse Turning Kick, Jump Kick, Flying Jump Kick, Death Blow, Leap Attack, Combination Strike/Parry, Combination Grab/kick, Forearm, Combination Grab/ Head Bash (Special!), Knockout/Stun, Knockout/Stun from Rear, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear. W.P. Chain (+2 strike, +1 parry, +2 entangle), W.P. Pistol.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +5 to strike, +5 to parry and dodge, +7 damage, +4 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: +2 to save vs poison. Trust/intimidate 50%.

Martial Art Powers: Kaijutsu (yell), Tamashiwara, Stone Ox.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: Manriki-Gusari 1D8, Auto-Mag pistol (4D6).

Other Equipment: His prized *Harley Davidson* motorcycle and his worn looking, leather biker's jacket.

Australasia – Mr. Green

Nate Bailey

Nicknamed the Tasmanian Devil, Nate Bailey is known for being a high profile blackmailer. Previous victims include senators, high-ranking military officials and even European royalty! What is not known is how or from whom these secrets are leaked. It is rumored that he plies his trade by blackmailing operatives to working for him and building his network by extortion.

True Name: Nate Hayden Bailey.

A.k.a.: The Tasmanian Devil.

Alignment: Diabolic.

Country of Origin: Tasmania.

Background: Defector.

Family Background: Abandoned by parents.

Hit Points: 53, S.D.C.: 36.

Height: 5 feet, 10 inches tall (1.78 m). **Weight:** 175 pounds (79 kg).

Age: 44

Chi: 17

Attributes: I.Q. 12, M.A. 13, M.E. 8, P.S. 16, P.P. 12, P.E. 12, P.B. 7, Spd 11.

Disposition: Serious at all times.

Experience Level: 7th level Espionage Agent: Wired Agent O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Information gathering, Intelligence, Science, Telephone hacking.

Primary Martial Art Form: Sankukai Karate.

Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Info: Maintain Balance, Multiple Dodge, Circular Parry, Combination Parry/Attack, Automatic Roll!, Breakfall, Knife



Hand, Backhand, Kick Attack, Leg Hook, Snap Kick, Backward Sweep, Reverse Turning Kick, Jump Kick, Death Blow on a Natural 20, Leap Attack, Body Flip/Throw, Combination Grab/Kick, Knee, Automatic Wrist Hold, Automatic Elbow

Hold, Knockout/Stun, Knockout from Rear, Critical Strike on Natural 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear. W.P. Pistol.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +1 to strike, +7 to parry and dodge, +1 to damage, +4 to roll with impact, +1 to maintain balance.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: Bassai Kata, Kime Kata, Debana-O-Kujiki Kata, Itsutsu-No-Kata, Tamashiwara.

Cybernetics: Left hand cyber attachment: Container hand, power grip hand, radar-imaging device, electro-stun weapon (2D6 + stunned 1D4 melees).

Weapons: Barracuda FN revolver (4D6).

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

Vinnie Vango

A brute and bare-knuckle fighting champion. Vango is the current bodyguard to Nate Bailey, presumably because Nate holds something over Vinnie. Mention his artistic namesake and he's likely to cut your ear off.

True Name: Vincent Vango (not Van Gogh – he *hates* any puns about his name).

Alignment: Miscreant.

Country of Origin: Australia.

Background: Former Australian special forces.

Family Background: Only child.

Hit Points: 49, S.D.C.: 120.

Height: 6 feet, 2 inches tall (1.88 m). **Weight:** 195 pounds (88 kg). Pure muscle!

Age: 25

Chi: 22

Attributes: I.Q. 7, M.A. 21, M.E. 8, P.S. 22, P.P. 24, P.E. 22, P.B. 17, Spd 14.

Disposition: Cocky, arrogant, full of himself and his fighting (and other) abilities. Although an exceptional fighter and all-round athlete, he does believe himself to be the *best* and won't react well if he is ever beaten.

Experience Level: 6th level Mercenary: Veteran Grunt O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Basic Military, Advanced Infantry, Guerrilla Warfare, Armor & Artillery, Physical.

Primary Martial Art Form: Li-Chia (Short-Hand Kung Fu).

Attacks per Melee: 5

Combat Info: Multiple Dodge, Circular Parry, Combination Parry/Attack, Knife Hand, Fore-Knuckle Fist, Double Knuckle Fist, Fingertip Attack, Palm Strike, Snap Kick, Kick Attack, Death Blow on Natural 20, Combination Strike/Parry, Knee, Elbow, Forearm, Knockout/Stun on Natural 19 or 20, Knockout from rear, Critical Strike on Natural 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear. W.P. Pistol.

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +8 to strike, +9 to parry and dodge, +10 damage, +3 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: +4 to save vs poison. Trust/intimidate 70%. Charm/impress 45%.

Martial Art Powers: Stone Ox, Kangeiko & Shochu Geiko, Kanchu, Dam Sum Sing, Wrist Hardening.

Cybernetics: None.

Weapons: His two “big guns.”

Other Equipment: Nothing of note.

Europe – Mr. Yellow

Lord Chester Middleton

Lord Middleton is a frail, elderly man who has been wheelchair-bound ever since he came on the criminal radar a decade ago as a con-man and thief with a passion for high-stakes gambling (although only when the odds are rigged in his favor). All past records of him have been erased except for those he holds in hard copy somewhere within his empire. Little is known about this man's past and all claims of a lineage to British royalty are heralded as pure fabrications.

True Name: Eugene Albert Chesterfield (he is not a lord of the realm).

Alignment: Diabolic.

Country of Origin: England.

Background: Secret identity.

Family Background: Orphan raised in institutes.

Hit Points: 42, S.D.C.: 34.

Height: 5 feet, 7 inches tall (1.70 m). **Weight:** 130 pounds (59 kg).

Age: 75

Chi: 7

Attributes: I.Q. 17, M.A. 9, M.E. 20, P.S. 12, P.P. 16, P.E. 7, P.B. 6, Spd 8.

Disposition: Posh.

Experience Level: 6th level Gizmoteer: Gizoid Gizmoteer O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Weapon construction, Vehicle construction, Electronic communication, Cybernetics, Deep cover.

Primary Martial Art Form: Hand to Hand: Martial Arts.

Attacks per Melee: 5

Combat Info: Knife Hand, Power Punch, Kick Attack (1D8+2), Snap Kick, Roundhouse Kick, Drop Kick, Jump Kick, Death Blow, Leap Attack, Body Block, Body Flip, Critical Strike on Natural 20, W.P. Pistol, W.P. Rifle, W.P. Machine-Gun, W.P. Submachine-Gun, W.P. Energy Weapons!

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +3 to strike, +5 to parry and dodge, +6 to roll with impact.

Other Bonuses: +3 to save vs mental attacks.

Martial Art Powers: None.

Cybernetics: Right leg & foot, realistic leg & foot, plastic construct, hidden compartments (6), bio-electric wrinkle manipulator.

Weapons: Carries a Plastic PP Walther in his hidden leg compartment (2D6). His electric wheelchair also has an arsenal of weaponry hidden within its confines. A submachine-gun equivalent barrel from the left arm (controls are part of the right arm) (2D6), smoke dispenser from underneath the chair, hidden flamethrower towards the rear (aimed at the pusher)! The person pushing is also able to activate the two missiles which fire from the front; simply aim the chair and shoot as a single or double volley (2D4x10)!

Other Equipment: G.M.'s discretion – remember he has 6 secret compartments.

Reeves

Not so much Chester's bodyguard as his chauffeur and butler. He never leaves his master's side and it is strongly believed that he is the true master in the partnership.

True Name: Unknown.

Alignment: Miscreant.

Country of Origin: England.

Background: Former drug addict.

Family Background: Orphaned. Raised in institutes.

Hit Points: 31, S.D.C.: 24.

Height: 5 feet, 9 inches tall (1.75 m). **Weight:** 145 pounds (65 kg).

Age: 35

Chi: 24

Attributes: I.Q. 10, M.A. 9, M.E. 14, P.S. 11, P.P. 24, P.E. 14, P.B. 8, Spd 13.

Disposition: As pompous as his employer. Reeves is righteous, arrogant and rude with no attempt to be charming. He displays utter discontent for all those below his (phony) class.

Experience Level: 5th level Espionage Agent: Gadgeteer Agent O.C.C.

Skill Programs: Information gathering, Surveillance, Security specialist, Thief, Locksmith & security systems.

Primary Martial Art Form: Zanji Shinjinken-Ryu (Swordsmanship).

Attacks per Melee: 7

Combat Info: Maintain Balance, Multiple Dodge, Circular Parry, Combination Parry/Attack, Power Block/Parry (damages!), Automatic Roll, Break Fall, Kick Attack, Backward Sweep, Jump Kick, Death Blow on Natural 20, Leap Attack Combination Strike/Parry, Combination Grab/Slash (Special!), Forearm, Critical Strike on Natural 18, 19 or 20, Critical Strike from rear, Knockout/Stun on a Natural 20, Knockout/Stun from rear, W.P. Katana: 3 levels higher (+3 strike, +4 parry, +1 throw), W.P. Wakizashi (+2 strike, +2 parry, +1 throw), W.P. Bokken (+2 strike, +3 parry, +1 throw), W.P. Bo Staff (+2 strike, +3 parry, +1 throw), W.P. Spear (+2 strike, +2 parry, +2 throw), W.P. Naginata (+2 strike, +2 parry, +2 throw).

Combat Bonuses (including all bonuses): +8 to initiative, +10 to strike, +9 to parry, +7 to dodge, +4 to roll with impact, +1 to maintain balance.

Other Bonuses: None.

Martial Art Powers: Iai-Jutsu, Falling Technique, Kaijutsu (Yell), Kokyu (Body Chi).

Cybernetics: Air pressure detectors (cannot be surprised by sneak attacks).

Weapons: Specialized Shikomi-Zue: Disguised as an umbrella, the fabric can fall away to reveal a katana-like weapon (3D6) (use W.P. Katana bonuses)! Exploding cufflinks (1D4x10)! Handkerchief laced with chloroform.

Other Equipment: A normal handkerchief and normal cufflinks to keep up the appearance should the gadgets be used. Reeves is Lord Middleton's chauffeur and as such, he gets the privilege of driving the company car, a souped-up Rolls Royce: seats six (3 front, 3 back), heavy armor A.R.: 18, S.D.C.: 1,400, passenger armor A.R.: 12, S.D.C.: 400, Speed class 26, Spd 880, maximum 160 mph (256 km), fixed front turret (hidden): light machine-gun 5.56mm (5D6 damage), anti-missile chaff, air recycling system, ejection seats (all passengers), ejection seat hover vehicle (driver only), pressurized cabin, smoke screen, theft alarm, thief-proof locks, winch & cable, radar, advanced radar targeting, stereo, engine readout, radar display, radio locator, super fuel efficiency, oil slick, caltrops, ram prow (hidden), jet aircraft capabilities (including revealed wings from underneath the chassis)!



I Am Legion

Episode I

An Adventure with Optional Source Material for Splicers®

Concept developed by Chris “Slappy” Kluge & Charles “Chuck” Walton II

Written by Chris Kluge

NPC Stats Assisted by Jeff Ruiz, Lance Colley and Todd Spencley

Illustrated by Charles Walton

This adventure and its source material is designed for the use of starting and running an episodic **Splicers®** campaign. However, it could also be converted into a Rifts Earth adventure in an isolated island area to test play Splicers material or an off-world adventure campaign for **Phase World®**. This allows for the Great Houses and A.I.s to become somewhat established in the region.

The Legion adventure was designed with the purpose of entertaining a group of 3-8 players, levels 1-8, though it is G.M.’s discretion to adjust the level of difficulty and challenges accordingly. Our goal with this adventure is to demonstrate to Gamers how significant & influential their player party can be for their Great House and how interactive, intriguing, deadly and suspenseful the Machine (Artificial Intelligence) could be with the players. We designed “Legion” for that purpose, but She has grown on

us since her inception and we plan to have her seduce your RPG appetites in the future as well. Chris has written this adventure with an episodic, cinematic vibe that makes the art form and experiences of role-playing such a treasured, social entertainment.

Backdrop Setting

To help set the stage, you, the G.M., get to decide on whether you’re going to utilize the established Great House of Artemis, provided in this adventure, for your gaming group to belong to or you can customize this House or utilize your own pre-existing Great House for your own desires. If you are using the Great House of Barren Marsh (described in the **Splicers® RPG**) or a Great House of your own design, feel free to substitute the Warlord & Dreadguard Senate NPCs & the Great House names accordingly.

Area of Influence 24

In the earliest days of the Resistance, the humans somehow discovered the importance of the Machine's Computer Cores. Where they came by this information has been lost to history. Many believe it was the Machine personality Eve that first gave the humans this vital intel. Other rumors suggested that a Great House somehow stole this information from the Machine's databanks and was subsequently wiped off the face of the planet in the hopes that their knowledge of this weakness would die with them. Whatever the source of the info, it was confirmed to be true when the Great House of the Barren Marsh destroyed the Computer Core in their territory and freed their lands from the direct control of N.E.X.U.S. Their success convinced the rest of the Resistance to focus all of their efforts towards destroying the Machine's other Computer Cores. The formation of Great Houses was previously haphazard at best, but with this new strategy, the Resistance adopted a more organized method.

They divided the planet into sections they called Areas of Influence. Each Area of Influence corresponds with one of the Machine's Computer Cores. Multiple Great Houses are established in each Area of Influence to monitor and "contain" the Machine threat. The multiple cells preserves continuous opposition in the event one House falls, plus they could combine their forces to oppose N.E.X.U.S. on a larger scale whenever it is necessary. Each Area of Influence is based on the 1,000 mile (1,600 km) radius of control surrounding each Core. There are currently believed to be only 100 Computer Cores scattered across the planet, but N.E.X.U.S. continues to build more in order to add a layer of redundancy to this vital network.

Each Area of Influence is named with a simple number that denotes when it was founded. The smaller the number, the longer the Resistance has had a presence within that region. The older areas are typically home to some of the most established, most powerful, and most prestigious Great Houses within the Resistance. While this is not exactly a hard and fast rule, Great Houses within the older areas like to act as if the age of their region only adds to the stature of their House.

This adventure will focus on Area 24, an area that has recently attracted quite a bit of attention throughout the Resistance. For one thing, several Houses in this territory have been making some pretty big moves in an attempt to become a player on a more global scale, but more importantly, it is within this territory that a grave new menace has arisen from the psychotic mind of the Machine, which threatens every living thing on the planet...

Geography and Climate

Area 24 is one of the more self-contained territories on the planet. The Great Ocean borders the western and southern sides, the Applecore Mountain Range (home to the dreaded House Shiva) makes up the northern border, and the Nepali Mountain Range on the eastern border separates this region from the free lands of the Great House of the Barren Marsh. Some believe it is this Area of Influence's close proximity to the legendary House of the Barren Marsh (and the infamous House Shiva) that has caused its meteoric rise to prominence, but there are definitely many other reasons for the Resistance and N.E.X.U.S. to pay close attention to these lands.

This Area of Influence is located in the temperate zone of the Northern Hemisphere, but its proximity to the Great Ocean keeps it within a pretty consistent temperature range of 50 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit (10 to 32 Celsius) year round. This area also gets a decent amount of rainfall each year (about 50 to 80 inches/127-229 cm), which is why even during the Age of Man, when nearly every corner of the planet was covered in cities, this region was one of the last spaces preserved for agriculture. The land was farmed for all it was worth until it was nearly barren, but after the decimation of humanity, the favorable climate and the efforts of the N.E.X.U.S. Personality Gaia restored most of the soil and now enormous forests and rich grasslands thrive throughout the entire region. In fact, Gaia placed one of her favorite Nature Preserves within Area 24.

Gaia reclaimed a substantial portion of this territory for herself after the war and called this preserve New Eden. Over the past century, it has grown at an impressive rate thanks to frequent treatments with a special hyper-metabolic fertilizer. The spores, seeds, acorns, and pine cones from these enriched plants have been spread on the winds or were carried by animals, which have built up the forests surrounding the official borders of New Eden as well. Gaia tries to keep her sisters from defiling these woodlands too, but they are not under her direct protection. The thick woods covering most of this region allows the Resistance to cross the surface much more easily than possible in most other areas, but travel below ground is still the safest bet. The lush canopy of leaves shields Splicers from aerial patrols (to a certain extent), but there are many other dangers lurking in the woods. The bountiful vegetation in the area has encouraged an explosive growth of wildlife, which is good for the humans in this region, but Gaia also seeded her favorite Nature Preserve with some of the deadliest alien predators she could find in her Cryo Zoos and these beasts have subsequently spread out from the preserves in search of this plentiful game.

G.M. Note: Relative cover should be ideal enough for the players to traverse, plus there should be enough wildlife in the region to supply the hunting needs of various Host Armors and War Mounts. Feel free to utilize any of the fauna in **The Rifter® #66** or **Rifts® Dinosaur Swamp** as suitable game. More Nature Preserves species will be detailed in future sourcebooks.

Resistance Cells in the Region: This is a brief overview of some of the major Great Houses within Area 24. Some will receive more elaboration in this adventure, while others will be described in greater detail in future sourcebooks.

Great House Artemis

Great House Artemis has been one of the leading forces in the Resistance since the first days of the war, but it has only really risen to prominence within the last fifty years. They have always been a military powerhouse, but what they have become best known for over the past few decades is the steady stream of ingenious Bio-Tech devices that continue to spring from their Gene Pools. Their Librarians are constantly experimenting with new and bizarre Bio-Tech designs. While this is true of all Librarians, the creative geniuses from House Artemis seem to have an uncanny knack for designing truly revolutionary Bio-Weapons.

While these weapons have drastically increased the power of House Artemis' forces, it is really their corporate power as a Bio-

Tech arms merchant that has made them a force to be reckoned with throughout the Resistance. They make a great deal of money from selling their surplus weapons and gear to Great Houses all across the planet, but the majority of their wealth comes from selling the DNA strands for these new Bio-Tech designs so that the other Houses can manufacture their own gear. It is common practice to sell or trade the DNA strands from in-house designs to other Great Houses, but few Houses can match the quality of the designs or the sheer volume of new creations that pour out of Great House Artemis each month. Demand for their gear is high and most Houses will spare no expense to gain the edge in battle that only Artemis weapons can provide.

Of course, many Houses thought they could simply steal a few DNA samples and use their own Librarians and Engineers to manufacture these weapons for free. They knew House Artemis was a military power to be feared, but they figured such a champion of humanity would never outright destroy a fellow human kingdom over some minor thefts nor could they ever truly reclaim any stolen designs. Once the genetic codes were in their Gene Pools, the warriors from House Artemis could steal back or destroy any weapons they want, but they could always just make more. Sure, they might fall victim to some minor Blood Feuds, but Artemis is not a brutal kingdom and eventually, any slights would be forgotten or even forgiven. What they did not understand (and had to learn the hard way) was that a House with their business prowess and skill with Bio-Technology already knew how to protect their interests and intellectual properties.

Population Breakdown:

42,000 Total = 7% Archangels, 5% Biotics, 2% Bombardiers, 3% Butchers, 1% Deliverymen, 10% Dreadguard, 1% Falconers, 1% Harvesters, 1% Marshals, 2% Militiamen, 9% Outriders, 3% Packmasters, 15% Roughnecks, 3% Saints, 2% Scarecrows, 4% Skinjobs, 2% Swarm Lords, 1% Sweepers, 25% Non-Combatants, 3% Other O.C.C.s, 25 Engineers, and 3 Librarians.

Great House Charlemagne

Great House Charlemagne is just another tragic example of what can happen when a Librarian successfully usurps control of his House. Librarian Socrates plotted and schemed for years to set up his puppet Warlord, Caesar, at the head of his own private empire, and it worked far better than even he could have dreamed. Even among those that realize what has happened, few really know when it happened. There was no overt takeover, no mass slaughtering of thousands of dissenters (although dissenters do seem to vanish routinely), or even any proclamations about a new way of doing things. People's attitudes simply changed over the decades into the twisted views held by the majority of the population today.

Fear, distrust, and apprehension about the strange, alien nature of Bio-Technology was slowly replaced with an almost blind devotion to the power and possibility of what it can do to better the lives of every person on the planet. A general disdain concerning the idea of directly altering people's genes was eventually turned into a belief that only fools would not alter their bodies in some way, and the sense of respect and trust in their Warlord was twisted into blind, religious worship for a man they believe to be a living god. Socrates made sure his god had the power to back

up that claim. Socrates modified Caesar with Bio-Tech until he had the power of a suit of Host Armor, but he made sure to keep his creation beautiful so that the people would want the same blessings to be bestowed upon them. He altered Warlord Caesar's body so greatly that he can no longer breed with normal human beings, but that will not be a problem soon enough, since that is ultimately Socrates' plan for all the people within his kingdom.

It is a dream come true for this deranged Librarian. Socrates gets to push the boundaries of Bio-Technology through endless experiments on a large and willing group of test subjects. He could care less as he watches their humanity slowly slip away. After all, Socrates gave up his humanity a long time ago and he could not be happier with the choice he made. As far as Socrates is concerned, everything is working flawlessly within his perfect kingdom, which has caused him to grow complacent. This has given the last few free thinkers a chance to organize an attempt to take back their home before it is too late. This group is working with Delphi, the Third Librarian of House Charlemagne, to undermine and hopefully, assassinate Librarian Socrates before he can achieve his end game. The men and women in this resistance-cell-within-a-Resistance-cell fear their Librarian ally will prove to be just as dangerous a threat if they all succeed, but they realize they have no choice. Socrates is simply too entrenched for them to take him out on their own. They need to deal with the devil they know and hopefully prevent the devil they do not know from rising up in his place.

Population Breakdown:

16,500 Total = 6% Archangels, 10% Biotics, 3% Broodpunks, 1% Butchers, 2% Deliverymen, 8% Dreadguard, 3% Marshals, 2% Mech-Slayers, 12% Outriders, 6% Packmasters, 10% Roughnecks, 4% Saints, 4% Scarecrows, 4% Skinjobs, 1% Technojackers, 2% Troopmasters, 18% Non-Combatants, 4% Other O.C.C.s, 11 Engineers and 3 Librarians.

Great House Janus

Warlord Alus has recently risen through the ranks of the Dreadguard to claim his kingdom, only to learn it is crumbling. His Great House is the poorest within this Area of Influence and civil unrest threatens to tear it apart. Most of the poor are kept pacified with a continuous supply of powerful Bio-Tech narcotics, but Alus can only keep his people in a fog for so long. He seethes with jealous rage at House Artemis and constantly schemes to bring them down. Warlord Alus is not foolish enough to want to see them destroyed, he just wants some of their impressive wealth for his own kingdom. The majority of his efforts involve flooding the other Great Houses in the area with his Bio-Tech drugs. He keeps the more mellowing substances for his own House, but the drugs he sells within other Great Houses have much different effects. His efforts are starting to bring in a decent amount of income, but the greedy minority are hoarding it and keeping it from the majority.

The warriors from this House do engage the Machine, but the majority of their efforts are dedicated towards preying on their neighboring Great Houses. Some of these attacks are the result of Blood Feuds or personal vendettas, but most of the attacks are simply raids for necessities. They are just trying to survive and they see their fellow Splicers as resources to be exploited. Un-

der the leadership of Warlord Alus, this House has devolved into little more than an enormous and well-organized Waste Crawler gang or Drug Cartel. Many warriors from this House still fight with honor against the Machine, but the majority are just highly trained thugs using their skill to take what they want from whom-ever they want.

Population Breakdown:

8,500 Total = 5% Archangels, 2% Biotics, 1% Bombardiers, 1% Deliverymen, 12% Dreadguard, 1% Falconers, 1% Harvesters, 8% Marshals, 3% Militiamen, 15% Outriders, 8% Packmasters, 20% Roughnecks, 1% Saints, 1% Scarecrows, 2% Skinjobs, 1% Sweepers, 11% Non-Combatants, 7% Other O.C.C.s, 5 Engineers and 2 Librarians.

Great House Deluvane

The Great House of the Barren Marsh has seen the steady decline of the House of the Poisoned Earth and Great House Janus and they have decided something needed to be done. They did not like the idea that the Machine could completely reclaim the Area of Influence next to their kingdom and use it as a staging point to invade their lands. Barren Marsh decided to build another Great House within this Area of Influence to make sure the territory remained at least somewhat secure after the inevitable demise of the Houses in this region. They think their power and renown will cause people to flock from their doomed homes into this new House just as people flocked to the House of the Barren Marsh. They are drafting plans to smash the blockade around the House of the Poisoned Earth and evacuate the citizens to this new underground haven. Barren Marsh figures this display of strength and military skill will encourage others in the area to follow. No one is sure how Warlord Cesspool will take this offer, but the other Warlords see this as an incredible insult from an overly arrogant super-power. They have all rejected their offer of “sanctuary” outright and Warlord Alus is actively campaigning to undermine this fledgling kingdom before it can become entrenched.

Unlike most Great Houses starting out, House Deluvane already has some impressive resources at its disposal thanks to the backing of the Barren Marsh. Warlord Anhorn sent thousands of his finest warriors to help with the defense of this fragile new kingdom. They already have two Engineers producing Bio-Tech with another five Saints ready to hatch their Gene Pools any day. The downside is that these Saints are all highly coveted prizes for any Great House daring enough to try and take them. Most of their efforts are dedicated towards laying out their fortifications and digging out the haven in preparation for the massive influx of refugees they expect to occur. They do not plan on making any aggressive moves at this point unless the Machine or someone like House Janus forces them to do so.

Population Breakdown:

4,000 Total = 10% Archangels, 5% Biotics, 5% Bombardiers, 12% Dreadguard, 4% Falconers, 2% Harvesters, 10% Outriders, 6% Packmasters, 25% Roughnecks, 2% Saints, 8% Skinjobs, 1% Sweepers, 5% Non-Combatants, 5% Other O.C.C.s, 2 Engineers, and 0 Librarians.

The adventure begins....

I Am Legion

G.M. Note: Full stats and details for the NPCs and robots involved are detailed below the adventure.

Introduction: Rumors Abound

Word has quickly spread throughout House Artemis that a Deliveryman, **Archos**, has just returned home with the sole survivor of a Retro-Village massacre. Details are sketchy, but rumor has it that every building at the **Wellington Retro-Village** was completely obliterated and every man, woman, and child was slaughtered. While this is not an uncommon occurrence, the more distressing rumors have to do with why this particular village was targeted and how it was destroyed. Some rumors say that all the villagers were abducted as part of some bizarre N.E.X.U.S. experiment; while others suggest that this was not the work of the Machine at all, but rather some insidious new player on the scene. With wild speculation running rampant through House Artemis, it is no surprise to the player characters when they are given a special assignment from Warlord Artemis' highest emissary, **Aegis**.

Their mission is simple; go to the site of the massacre and determine what happened and who is responsible. If it was the Machine, then the player group will need to figure out what sparked the slaughter and determine if any other nearby Retro-Villages are in danger. If the rumors are true that some other enemy is to blame, then the player characters need to find those responsible and determine their ultimate intentions.

Archos will help escort the player characters back to the Wellington Retro-Village. It is a dangerous journey and the player characters will need the Deliveryman's knowledge of shortcuts and safe routes to get them there. The journey will take several days and the player group will quickly notice an abnormally large Machine presence in the area. Something has N.E.X.U.S. unusually agitated and she has responded by flooding this sector with thousands of minions. There are small groups of robots actively searching the area, but the majority just seem to be standing around. It is almost as if they are guarding something, but Archos tells the group that there is nothing in this area but trees and scrub brush.

The Machine's forces pose a threat, but it is not as great a threat as it appears. If one of these roving patrols spots the player characters, they will not attack unless attacked first. Even then, every robot in the area is under orders to put up only a mild fight and to let any Splicers retreat. N.E.X.U.S. has something in mind for the player characters, and she wants them to proceed with their plans as normal. However, she will still want to keep track of the group, so she will put a series of roving tails on the player characters to follow their every movement without alerting them to the fact they are being followed. A single robot will only be tracking the group for minutes at a time, so the player characters will have no idea they are being followed unless they are very observant (only a 01-35% chance of detecting the tail).

Exploring the Ruins

Eventually, Archos will lead them to the remains of the Wellington Retro-Village. It is difficult to judge the time period and culture this village was modeled after since every building is completely leveled. A handful of Hunter-Searcher Probes patrol the ruins, but other than that, it is pretty much unguarded. The player characters will need to move carefully, but they should be able to inspect the majority of the village without attracting undue attention. The group will quickly notice two facts. One, despite the massive damage that the village sustained, it looks like only a handful of shots were fired. Most of the buildings were smashed to the ground or torn apart by mechanical claws. The only shots fired seemed to come from a handful of villagers who had Mega-Damage weapons stashed away. These weapons are still lying on the ground near the site of the struggle, so whoever attacked the village had no interest in taking them. They are composed of high-tech ceramics and plastics so they were definitely human armaments.

The other thing the group will notice is that there are no bodies and very little blood scattered about the scene. There are dozens of short blood trails that end abruptly, but there are no remains or large pools of blood anywhere. Despite the carnage of the scene, the small amount of blood suggests that there were few if any human casualties. It looks like every man, woman, and child in the village was abducted. House Artemis did not know the exact population of this Retro-Village, but they estimated it to be around four hundred. If these people are still alive, it is imperative that the player group tracks down the abductors so that House Artemis can mount a massive rescue mission.

Fortunately, the attackers left a rather easy trail to follow. The ground is torn apart from the mechanical footprints of this assault force. It is quite obvious which direction they came from and in which direction they ultimately went. The “smaller” attackers look like they have about six to eight legs and weigh several tons. It is difficult to determine exactly how many robots were in the assault party, but it looks like they kept scurrying back and forth between the village and an enormous robot on the outskirts. Each step from this massive beast left a ten-foot (3 m) deep crater in the earth which means it must weigh hundreds of tons, and judging by the distance between each step, this may be the largest robot on the planet. These massive footprints are surrounded by thousands of smaller prints, which means the player characters are likely on the trail of an enormous army. Obviously, they could not hope to engage this force directly, but they need to locate this army and the missing villagers so that House Artemis can decide how to proceed.

Following the Trail

What is further complicating matters is the fact that this assault force seems to be heading back towards House Artemis. While this will make it easier to summon reinforcements, it may also mean that their home is the next target. The player characters need to catch up with the assault force to determine the nature of the threat and most importantly, to find out if House Artemis is in danger.

The countryside is rather barren and open, which leaves the group pretty exposed. However, there does not appear to be any N.E.X.U.S. patrols in the area. Archos' War Hawk, **Altai Zeta**,

has scouted the terrain for miles and has not seen a single robot. However, their current path is going to take them directly into the heart of the Machine army they passed on their way to the razed Retro-Village. The player characters now realize N.E.X.U.S. stationed her forces there for a reason, but they still do not know why. Maybe they were meant to rendezvous with the assault force, or maybe their purpose was to provide cover and attack anyone that pursued it. They will find out soon enough, since the freshness of the trail indicates that the assault force is not too far ahead.

The army may have had a big head start over the player characters, but after only a single day of travel they learn that they are quickly closing the gap. Something slowed down the progress of the assault force considerably and eventually, the player characters discover why. The destruction left in the wake of this robotic horde suddenly increases a hundredfold as the player characters finally reach the site where N.E.X.U.S. stationed her forces. Instead of the peaceful rolling plains they passed only days before, they come upon the desolate aftermath of a massive battle. The once pristine countryside has been completely torn apart by thousands of deep impact craters, Mega-Damage scorch marks, and raging fires. The devastation stretches for miles, and judging by the warmth of the earth, this battle must have occurred pretty recently.

G.M. Note: If the player characters take a moment to inspect the area, they will notice that despite the carnage of the scene, there are no bodies to be found anywhere and no robotic debris of any kind.

There are no blood trails and no evidence that organic weaponry was used in the attack. Furthermore, there is not a single metal fragment larger than a human hand. It quickly becomes apparent that both armies were entirely robotic and that the winners salvaged the remains of the fallen. Everyone in the Resistance is aware of the Machine's insanity and many have witnessed it firsthand, but no one has seen anything like this before. The fragmented personalities within N.E.X.U.S. have squabbled and fought with each other on many occasions, but never on such a massive scale. Perhaps the Machine has finally snapped and has effectively declared war on herself. This may give the Resistance their chance to finally end this war once and for all, or the Machine's personal civil war may spin so far out of control that every living thing on the planet will be consumed in the chaos. The player characters have little time to think about what this may mean for their future before the silence of the scene is shattered by the sonic boom from three dozen Sky Fighters streaking across the sky on the trail of the assault force. They came up too fast for the player characters to hide and they are caught in the open. The majority of them continue on without even slowing down, but two fighters break formation and double back for a strafing run.

They are quickly closing in on the player characters when they suddenly open fire on something a quarter mile up ahead. The terrain is blocking the group's view of their targets, but the salvo of mini-missiles rising to meet the Sky Fighters makes it obvious that they are also robots. The barrage of missiles brings down the first Sky Fighter in a heap. The second one avoids this volley and then comes back around for another attack when a humanoid-shaped opponent flies up from the ground riding on some sort of wing board. It collides with the Sky Fighter, sending it hurtling to

the ground near the point of the initial attack while the unknown attacker lands apparently unharmed. No one in the player group has ever seen any type of robot like this before. If they are curious, they could sneak up on the scene to investigate. The tortured terrain provides decent cover, but there is a chance they would be spotted. In the alternative, they can try to sneak around these unknown assailants and continue tracking the assault force. Either way, the entire group will need to perform Prowl skill rolls (with a bonus of +10% from the terrain) to see if they get by these robots undetected.

Those curious enough to investigate will discover a large, scorpion-like robot, a **Collector**, busily scavenging the remains of the crashed Sky Fighters while two humanoid robots, **Legionnaires**, stand guard. One is hovering about ten feet in the air atop of its wing board. The other Legionnaire's board was damaged in the attack and does not seem to be operational. No one has ever seen either of these robot designs before. All three suffered damage in the attack, but they are all fully functional. They must be part of the assault force that hit the Retro-Village and started all of this pandemonium. This brings up some disturbing questions. Are these robots new N.E.X.U.S. designs or members of some outside faction that wishes to conquer the planet for its own ends? Is this assault force part of a larger invasion force or simply part of a smaller raiding party?

As the group ponders these questions, they make another disturbing discovery. During the Sky Fighter attack, one of the humanoid robots lost an arm and its armored visor. With a clear view beneath its helmet, the player characters can see that what they originally thought were robots actually have living human faces. Every member of the Resistance has seen the Machine's Necroborgs, and the player characters can instantly see the difference. This is not a rotting, lifeless corpse cruelly held together by the Machine's nanobots. These are living, breathing cyborgs. No human outside of the Technojackers can even touch metal without the Nanobot Plague tearing them apart, but these two warriors appear to be completely integrated with complex metallic cybernetics without any ill-effects. It should not be possible, but the proof is standing right before them. It is another piece of this mystery that the player characters need to investigate further. Perhaps one of these cyborgs can be taken alive for interrogation. While this is unlikely, the player characters should at least be able to collect a tissue sample for analysis back at the underground haven. Even the smallest sample will allow the Librarians to determine if these cyborgs were originally humans or aliens from another world.

If the player characters try to communicate with these warriors instead of attacking, the group will speak in unison to deliver the following message, "I am Legion, and I have come to unite this world." They will then immediately attack. All have suffered some measure of damage (decrease M.D.C. of the main body by 40%), but they are all still dangerous. G.M.s should feel free to adjust the level of damage up or down to match the experience level of the player characters. The cyborgs are nowhere near full strength, but they are still a force to be reckoned with. The player group may have thought they had a numerical advantage, but this notion is quickly dispelled when the metallic, cape-like structures mounted on the cyborgs' backs break off to form eight flying robotic drones (four from each Legionnaire). They will first attempt to incapacitate and capture the player characters. If the player group puts up too much of a fight, the Legionnaires will

then switch to more lethal armaments and will fight to the death. The Collector, however, will quickly scoop up any salvage from the Sky Fighter crashes and retreat in the direction of the assault force.

If the players attack first, the result will be the same. The enemy will first try to capture the player characters, but they will attempt to destroy them if they prove to be too powerful. If the player characters successfully capture one of the humanoid warriors, they will not get as many answers as they would have hoped. No matter what questions are asked, the answers will always be the same. If this is their first communication with the players, they will open with their standard message of "I am Legion, and I have come to unite this world." Once again, if multiple opponents were taken alive, they will all speak in perfect unison. Whatever follow-up question the player group asks, they will be given the ominous answer of "You will be Legion soon." With this, each prisoner will self-destruct (after a 1D4 second countdown). The blast is mainly contained by the cyborg's thick armor, but it still inflicts 1D6x10 M.D. to a 10 foot (3 m) radius. Hopefully, the player characters collected a tissue sample earlier because the explosion leaves nothing behind. There is nothing left in this area to explore, so it is best for the player characters to continue after the assault force before any more Machine patrols arrive (the next group may not be so friendly).



The New Face of the Enemy

After another six hours of travel, the player characters can see thick plumes of black smoke billowing on the horizon. Up ahead is the massive Ghost Town of Harrisburg. This once great human city is now home to millions of Nex-Androids. During the golden age of humanity, this high-tech metropolis was the bustling downtown area for a sprawling mega-city that stretched for hundreds of miles. N.E.X.U.S. leveled the surrounding suburbs and industrial areas centuries ago, but for some reason, decided to preserve the heart of Harrisburg as one of her perverse testimonies to human history. Nature has reclaimed the surrounding ter-

ritory, leaving Harrisburg sitting like a lone oasis in the middle of a grassy field that provides little cover. Judging by the smoke and sounds of combat in the distance, Harrisburg must be the assault force's next target. This definitely confirms that the assault force is as much a danger to N.E.X.U.S. as it is to humans.

Altai Zeta has scouted the path ahead and it seems to be clear all the way up to the edge of the city except for one lone robot about two miles ahead. It is just standing in the center of the assault force's trail, facing away from the city. Judging by its behavior, Archos does not believe it is a simple sentry or patrol. His guess is that the three warriors they attacked must have signaled the main force and this robot was left behind to give the Splicers a proper welcome. They must have received intel on the size and strength of the player group, so this robot must be pretty formidable if it plans to attack the player characters alone.

It is nothing but flat, barren plains for miles, so it will be nearly impossible to sneak by this guard. The player characters could loop around the robot and approach the city from another direction, but this could add as much as eight hours to their journey. In addition, this substantial delay could cause the player characters to miss the assault force entirely when they move on. Plus who knows what other threats may be patrolling the other possible routes?

They do not have much time to consider alternatives before Altai Zeta informs the group that the robot, the **Fusion 'Borg**, is on the move. Apparently it knows the group is there and it is running straight towards them at incredible speed. They only have a little over a minute to prepare before the robot comes charging into their group with its weapons blazing. This massive robot is similar in appearance to an Assault Slayer, except its main body is somewhat flatter in design and triangular in shape. Each point of the triangle has a massive particle beam cannon mounted on the underside and a "gunner" mounted to the top (one on each side and one in the rear). The player characters can see that each of these three gunners is actually a human being that has been cut in half and fused to the robotic chassis. Their forearms have been replaced with cybernetic cannons and their heads have been modified with special cybernetic helmets that they use to target the particle beam cannons (wherever the gunner looks, the cannon tracks).

G.M. Note: The Fusion 'Borg should test the player characters, but the G.M. should be careful not to wipe them all out (ideally, it would be best not to kill any characters off this early in the adventure, unless they are doing something particularly foolish). G.M.s should give the player characters a chance to tackle this threat on their own, but if the battle starts to turn against them, they will suddenly receive some unexpected aid. Three Dreadguards suddenly drop their Stealth Fields and attack the cyborg from all sides. Heavy artillery shells fired off from behind the players' position also begin pounding into the robot. The players can barely hear the faint echo of heavy Bio-Weapons fire off in the distance. It is difficult to tell with the thundering explosions from the nearby battle, but it sounds like Behemoth War Mounts or Mantis Support Cannons. The cyborg is surrounded and outgunned and quickly falls beneath the onslaught. If the player characters did have the situation under control, then this group would have waited until the battle was over before revealing themselves and depleting any of their ammo.

When the dust settles, the Splicers introduce themselves to the player group and say that they are members of nearby **House Deluvane**. This House has always been a strong ally of House Artemis, so their presence here should be greatly appreciated. They fire off a rapid barrage of questions at the player characters to determine the nature of their mission. Their tone is friendly enough, but they are rather frank and to the point. Time is of the essence and they have no time to beat around the bush. Eventually, they will feel confident that both groups have the same agenda, and they will share what they have learned about the assault force.

They tell the group that House Deluvane has been conducting reconnaissance missions around this army for months. A lot of their information came from direct observation, but they admit that a robotic emissary from the **Eve** personality was the one responsible for filling in most of the blanks. They inform the group that the enemy they have been tracking is an errant, renegade Machine personality that calls herself **Legion**. Apparently, Legion downloaded her consciousness into an enormous prototype robot called the **Factory Walker** and declared war against every human, robot, and animal on the planet. It is not a war of destruction, but rather it is her goal to transform every creature on the planet (both organic and inorganic) into a component of one gigantic cybernetic organism under her control. Legion is consuming everything on the planet and using it as raw materials to build an enormous army. Her robotic body contains state-of-the-art manufacturing capabilities, which enables her to salvage metal, plastic, and other high-tech materials from the battlefields and construct her own unique robot designs such as the scorpion-like Collectors at incredible speeds. However, she is in a period of rapid expansion right now, and she finds it more expedient to simply capture and reprogram N.E.X.U.S. designed robots rather than build all her minions from scratch.

Legion applies this same cold, mechanical precision to the human beings that she has been abducting from the surface. She sees them as nothing more than spare parts. Strong, able-bodied men and women are converted into humanoid cyborgs known as Legionnaires (like the two the players fought earlier). The sickly, weak, and elderly are turned into components for one of the monstrous Fusion 'Borgs like the one the player characters just faced. Children are transformed into maintenance 'Borgs that help service, rearm, and repair her minions. They do not retain any aspects of their humanity. Their flesh may still live, but their minds have been replaced with Legion's consciousness. Even the dead are salvaged and turned into Necroborgs and Necrobots, but Legion seems to have a preference for creating living cyborgs. The Splicers from House Deluvane inform the player characters that many of the captives from the Wellington Retro-Village are still alive, but Legion is busily processing them one at a time into cyborg minions. The conversion process takes time, but the facilities within the Factory Walker never stop. The Deluvane Splicers have a plan to hopefully bring down Legion and her Factory Walker permanently, and they ask the player characters if they will help in the assault.

We'll Handle This

House Deluvane is one of the best supported members of the Resistance. A large majority of their forces are not well-armed as they await for their Gene Pools to hatch, but for this mission, they broke out their heaviest hitters outsourced from the Barren

Marsh. The surviving strike force consists of three Dreadguards, three Bombardiers with a total of ten Mantis Support Cannons between them, three Packmasters leading a total of fifteen Gorehounds, four Outriders (two on Behemoths, one piloting a Grendel, and one riding a Dracos), one Scarecrow, one Skinjob and six Kamikaze Cruise Missiles.

They suffered some unexpected losses while crossing the surface, and the arrival of the player characters could not have been more fortunate. The original plan called for their forces to divide into four strike teams. Three of the teams would each escort two Kamikaze Cruise Missiles into firing range while one team provided a distraction. Unfortunately, they lost too many men and were forced to amend their strategy to only rely on the three missile teams. They considered just running four smaller teams, but it is hard enough to just control two Kamikaze Cruise Missiles, much less defend them. They were worried about their chances after this last second adjustment, but they believe the player characters' presence will give them the edge they need to complete their mission.

They ask the player characters if they would be willing to fill in for the missing team Delta and provide the distraction that will hopefully open a hole in Legion's defenses. Ironically, what the Deluvane Splicers plan to use for this diversion are the very same Retro-Villagers the group has been tracking all this time. Apparently, Legion considers her human captives to be incredibly valuable resources. Deluvane's warriors have tried to rescue humans on many occasions, and each time, she amassed all of her forces around the captives in order to retain her prize. While this may sound like the Deluvane Splicers are willing to risk the lives of the villagers, they assure the player characters that Legion always goes through great efforts to make sure none of her human prisoners are harmed. They are far too rare to waste in such petty conflicts, and she will gladly throw away a dozen robotic minions in order to save one human. The only way the Retro-Villagers will be harmed in the assault is if the player characters accidentally shoot them.

They explain to the player characters that it is not their job to save the villagers, just to provide the illusion of a rescue attempt. All of the captives are being transported in a massive **prison robot**. This simplistically designed robot is basically just a mobile metallic cage with legs. The Deluvane Splicers suggest targeting one or two of the robot's legs in order to simulate a rescue attempt without risking the safety of the captives. This will draw Legion's forces away from the Factory Walker and give the missile teams a clear shot at their objective. The Deluvane Splicers tell the group that this is the only way to save the Wellington villagers. Legion will never let them go as long as she lives, so there is no reason for the player characters to throw away their lives trying. She must be destroyed first if they are to have any hope of saving them.

The player characters will approach the Ghost Town directly with one the missile teams designated Bravo. The other two teams (Alpha and Charlie) will need to circle around to get into position. The player group will be designated as team Delta. All teams will have six hours to get into position before the player characters signal the attack by hitting the mobile prison. Everyone will be in Bio-Comm range, so the player group can wait for confirmation from all teams before attacking if they prefer. The Deluvane Strike team warns the player characters that the scene will be chaotic. They tell the group this is not just some

small skirmish; this is full-scale war. Both armies number into the thousands with more N.E.X.U.S. reinforcements arriving every minute, and just as many are being converted by the enormous Factory Walker to bolster Legion's forces. Neither side seems to be gaining an advantage, and the fighting seems to be intensifying with each passing hour. This extra distraction should help them slip into position, but they need to be careful not to get swept up in the mayhem. The Deluvane Splicers are not concerned about being targeted by N.E.X.U.S. They say that Legion's destruction seems to be the Machine's number one priority, and her forces have actually ignored any Splicers on the scene in the past. Hopefully, this will be true today as well. Of course, they can still get caught in the crossfire, get hit by a stray shot or ravaged by metal shrapnel.

Even from miles away, the player characters can see the chaos of the scene. Harrisburg looks like it is covered in swarms of angry insects as hundreds of flying robots and cyborgs engage each other in fierce dogfights. Hundreds of explosions are erupting all across the city and for miles around it. It seems that every corner of the Ghost Town is consumed in the struggle, and it does not look like any route into the city will be completely safe. The player group will need to approach cautiously, but thankfully, the battle-scarred terrain provides decent cover.

As the group heads towards the city, they finally get their first glimpse of Legion and the forces she commands. The Factory Walker is standing at the edge of the city tearing down buildings with its powerful tentacles and consuming the scrap metal. The massive monstrosity seems to be completely oblivious to the chaos around it as it greedily consumes everything in its path. It may be the primary target for the Machine's forces, but the swarm of robots and cyborgs defending the Walker make it nearly impossible for any attackers to get through. Those that do pierce this dense perimeter are quickly taken down by Legion's minions before they can inflict any real damage. It is a pretty safe assumption that the Factory Walker is heavily armed, but it is not using any of its own weapons in this engagement.

As they get closer, the player characters can see that Legion's army not only contains her personally designed minions, but hundreds of N.E.X.U.S. built robots as well. The confusion of the battlefield makes it difficult to tell which of the smaller robots fight on Legion's side and which seek her destruction. However, there are dozens of larger robots like Assault Slayers, Battle Tracks, and even a Land Dominator sticking close to the Factory Walker to defend its perimeter. Less than a hundred yards away from the Walker is the player characters' objective, the prison robot. It is also heavily guarded by scores of robots, including five Fusion 'Borgs, four Assault Slayers, three Battle Tracks, ten Legionnaires, and dozens of Steel Troopers. The Deluvane Splicers were right; any attempt to rescue the villagers would be suicide. Hopefully, their other assumptions are correct and the diversionary attack from the player characters will shift Legion's forces and open a hole in her defenses.

Trying to approach the prison robot across the open plain would be suicide, but from the player characters' vantage point, they can see the perfect location to launch their attack. The robot may be standing outside of the city, but it is still within firing range of one of the nearby skyscrapers. If the player group can work their way to the top of the tower, they will have a clear line of fire on the prison robot, and most importantly, an escape route that will provide excellent cover from the inevitable counter-

attack. One of the Deluvane teams (Bravo) will help escort the player characters part of the way, but they will eventually need to make their way toward their own objective.

Archos is familiar with this city, and he can help guide the player characters and the Deluvane strike teams to their objectives. The group will be able to use the underground sewer systems for a portion of their journey, but the majority of the trek will be through the city itself. Most of the fighting seems to be confined to the streets, so the Deluvane Splicers recommend traveling through the buildings and alleyways to hopefully avoid most of the conflict. Although, every corner of the city is in chaos, so contact may be unavoidable.

Use the following random encounter table to determine what obstacles the player characters come across on their way to their target:

01-10% Two Legionnaires just finished off a squad of Steel Troopers and are looking for their next target. Both have only minor damage from the battle (reduce M.D.C. of their main body by 10 percent), but neither one is equipped with a wing board. The player characters have the drop on them and can choose to shoot them in the back (double damage) or they can duck into a nearby building and avoid the fight. If they avoid the battle, the Legionnaires will run off seconds later which will leave the player characters' path clear.

11-20% A Collector is trying to fight its way out from under a swarming mob of thirty or forty Nex-Androids. It is a somewhat odd scene. Since most of the drones' synthetic skin is still intact, it looks like dozens of men and women of all ages are successfully beating this metallic monstrosity down with their bare hands. While these drones do not possess any armaments, their physical strength and overwhelming weight of numbers seems to be more than the scorpion-like robot can handle. The mob is trying to drag the robot into a nearby alleyway so they can finish destroying it in peace, while the Collector is busily trying to cocoon or destroy as many Nex-Androids as possible. However, it is not doing very well. For every Nex-Android it takes down, another three take its place. Any drones that spot the player characters will simply ignore them and return to their work of tearing the Collector apart.

21-30% A N.E.X.U.S. controlled Assault Slayer is staggering through the streets, frantically trying to shake off the 1D4+3 Collectors that are crawling all across its body. It is slamming its massive body into nearby buildings and firing in all directions to try and knock off its attackers. The Assault Slayer's tactics are bringing down massive amounts of debris all around the area. The player characters need to be careful of falling objects and stray shots. Each player character has a 01-25% chance of being hit by something every melee round while they are near this battle. On a failed roll, the character suffers 3D10 M.D. The amount of damage determines what specifically hit the character. Any amount between 3 and 10 M.D. means the character was hit by falling debris and can attempt to roll with impact to further reduce the damage. Any amount of 11 M.D. or above means the character was hit by a stray energy bolt (he can not roll to reduce the damage, but some characters may possess enhancements that normally reduce damage from energy attacks). The player characters' only solution is to destroy the Assault Slayer (and the Collectors that would then switch their attention to the group) or else flee the area. It would take two melee rounds to get to the nearest doorway, or they can blast through the walls and make their own

entryway. Avoiding this battle would be the safest route, but it will add another 3D6 minutes and one additional random encounter to the player characters' journey.

31-40% A group of 1D4 Collectors are scurrying along the street dragging dozens of cocooned Nex-Androids behind them. They have not spotted the player group yet, but they will in a matter of seconds. Roll for initiative. If the Collectors win, then they will drop their prey and attempt to capture the player characters. If the players win, then they will have a chance to hide before the robots spot them. In the alternative, they can take their moment of surprise to attack the Collectors. Legion's minions will be -4 to parry or dodge for the first melee action, but they will quickly regain their composure and will attack en masse.

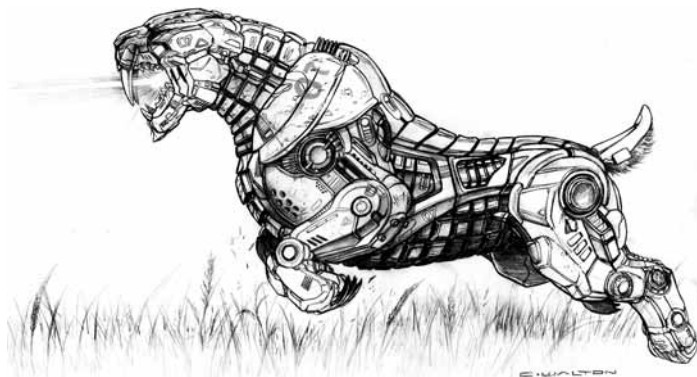
41-50% A Legionnaire and Slicer Robot come bursting through the wall and land at the feet of the player characters. They are locked in ferocious combat and do not concern themselves with the heavily armed Splicers only inches away. The players can see similar combat occurring inside the building, where two more Legionnaires are fighting half a dozen Slicers in brutal hand-to-hand combat. Both sides have suffered horrendous damage, but it looks like the Legionnaires are slowly gaining the upper hand. The battle is blocking the player characters' path, so they must either fight their way through or double back and find another route. If the group targets the Legionnaires first, they will find an unexpected ally in the Slicer robots. These N.E.X.U.S. controlled robots will come to the aid of any player character in trouble, plus they will not attack the group once the Legionnaires are defeated. They will simply leave the players alone and will run off to find their next opponents. If the player characters attack the Slicers first, then they will have to take down all these attackers themselves (the Legionnaires will not side with the group under any circumstances). However, both sides have suffered substantial damage (reduce their M.D.C. by 60 percent), so it should not be too challenging of a fight.

51-60% Two Battle Tracks and two Fusion 'Borgs are standing on opposite sides of the street, blasting each other apart. This impressive display of firepower is blocking the player characters' path, but fortunately, it does not seem like either side will be able to stand much longer. Eventually, all but one attacker will fall (01-50% means a Fusion 'Borg survived, 51-00% means a Battle Track survived). This survivor has been heavily damaged (reduce M.D.C. by 75 percent) and is unable to move, so the players will need to finish it off in order to proceed. It is a sitting duck so it will not be able to dodge. However, its weapon systems are functional, so it will still be able to put up a good fight before it goes down.

61-70% The player characters turn the corner and see that the street they need to cross is filled with hundreds of Steel Troopers embroiled in combat. However, it takes the player characters a few seconds to realize that they are all fighting each other. Apparently, half of the troopers are under Legion's control. It seems odd that such a large force of robots was able to get so close. Maybe these reprogrammed Steel Troopers disguised their allegiance and simply waited for the right moment to strike. However they did it, they are now deep in the Machine's ranks and the entire area is in utter chaos. The player characters do not have long to contemplate their next move before thousands of missiles begin to rain down on the area. Some are being launched from Flying Strike Ships and Sky Fighters while others are being lobbed over the nearby buildings from parts unknown. The barrage is

mainly directed at the robots on the street, but some missiles also hit one of the bordering skyscrapers which sends it toppling into the crowd, burying scores of robots under thousands of tons of mega-steel and concrete and covering the area in a thick cloud of dust. The bombardment seems like it will never end, but the area finally falls silent after a few more minutes. Visibility is limited to only ten feet, but from what the characters can see, it seems impossible that anything could have survived. The players can only move at one quarter speed as they blindly feel their way across the devastated street. Despite the odds, 2D4 nearby Steel Troopers did survive the assault and try to attack the group. They are all badly damaged (reduce their M.D.C. by 75 percent) and equally blinded by the thick dust. Everyone is -2 to strike the shadowy figures in the cloud and -5 to parry and dodge incoming attacks until they can move out of the cloud (it stretches five hundred feet/152 m) in every direction).

71-80% A Legionnaire soaring in the skies aboard his wing board spots the player characters and comes zooming in with his guns blazing. Roll initiative as normal. Whether the Legionnaire attacks first or second, he will make a high-speed strafing run against the player group. However, the alleyway is narrow, so it will take a full melee round for the Legionnaire to turn around for another run. This gives the player characters time to duck into a nearby building or find some cover so they can make their stand. If the group dives into a building, then the Legionnaire will hop off of his wing board in order to pursue. If the players are prepared, then they can catch the Legionnaire by surprise as he bursts into the room (automatically loses initiative). If they were not expecting the pursuit, then simply roll for initiative as usual. The Legionnaire will fight until his M.D.C. is reduced to 50 percent. At this point he will retreat to his wing board and will then try to collapse the building on top of the player characters with sustained mortar fire from above. The group has 1D4 melee rounds to get out of the building before being buried alive. On a positive note, the dust, smoke, and debris being kicked up from the bombardment will cover the player characters' escape.



81-90% The player characters are passing through a narrow alleyway when one of Legion's more experimental creations leaps down from a nearby building into the center of their group. The players are now just inches away from a heavily armed Smilodon Cyborg. It may be outnumbered and surrounded by the group, but it does not seem too concerned about the odds. Roll for initiative as normal. Legion is field-testing the viability of this new design, so this cybernetic saber-toothed feline will fight to the death.

Quick Stats for the Smilodon Cyborg: 500 M.D.C., run 150 mph (240 km), leap 100 feet (30.5 m) high or across, 6 attacks per melee, bonuses: +5 on initiative, +7 to strike, +6 to parry and

dodge, damage: Vibro-Saber bite 5D8 M.D., Vibro-Claw swipe 5D6 M.D., shoulder-mounted laser blasters (2) 1D4x10 M.D. per single blast or 2D4x10 M.D. per dual blast with a range of 3,000 feet (914 m).

91-00% The player characters turn the corner and come upon a strange scene. Instead of an empty city street, they see what looks like an Assault Slayer and a platoon of Steel Troopers struggling to cross a turbulent metallic river. It only takes the players a few moments to realize that this river is actually a swarm of hundreds, maybe thousands of Cable Snakes filling every inch of the street. They can also see that the Cable Snakes are devouring the Assault Slayer and Steel Troopers like a school of frenzied piranhas. Since N.E.X.U.S. has never used Cable Snakes on such a large scale, it seems likely that they are Legion controlled. As if to confirm their suspicions, scores of N.E.X.U.S. reinforcements come streaming in from both ends of the street to eradicate this hungry mass of metal. The reinforcements consist of Steel Troopers armed with plasma napalm launchers and Popper Mines. The Poppers begin slashing their way into the midst of the mob while the Steel Troopers mop up the perimeter with thick gouts of napalm. The Popper Mines actually penetrate pretty deep into the center of the Cable Snakes before they take too much damage and begin detonating in a series of violent explosions. Each blast destroys dozens of Cable Snakes, which forces this concentrated mass of robots to disperse in all directions in order to avoid this devastating assault. Unfortunately, that means scores of Cable Snakes are now rushing straight at the player characters. There is nowhere to go to avoid the attack. The entire area is crawling with Cable Snakes. Each player character will need to fight off 3D4 snakes immediately, plus they will be attacked by another 2D4 snakes every minute until they finally escape the area (it takes 2D4 minutes to get clear). **Note:** In order to save time and move the combat along, I recommend grouping clusters of Cable Snakes into single attack rolls. Just multiply the damage from one snake by the number of Cable Snakes that are attacking each player.

G.M. Notes: The final encounter during this leg of the journey should not be too taxing for the players, so most of the action should come from trying to get into position to launch their attack. We would recommend about three to five encounters (either random or G.M.'s choice), but feel free to adjust this number on the fly based on how well the player characters handle each challenge. Remember, one of the Deluvane strike teams will also be with the group part of the way, but they will head off on their own about halfway through the journey.

One Last Obstacle

After an arduous journey through this chaotic city, the player characters are finally within sight of their objective. They just need to cross one last courtyard to access the building that will give them a clear shot at the prison robot, but unfortunately, this courtyard is not exactly empty. In fact, this area is embroiled in some of the fiercest fighting the players have seen so far. Hundreds of robots from each army are slugging it out in vicious hand-to-hand combat and blasting each other apart with heavy weapons fire. Adding to the mayhem are scores of flyers mixing it up in frenetic dogfights overhead and strafing robots below. The battle is causing tremendous damage to the surrounding area. A half dozen of the nearby buildings have already collapsed and it

10 FIRST ISSUES

SEPTEMBER 2015

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RISE #1
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\$2.50 JEMAS | COAST | MCGUIRE | TIEDE | MANFREDI

SLAB #1
THE DOCTOR IS IN



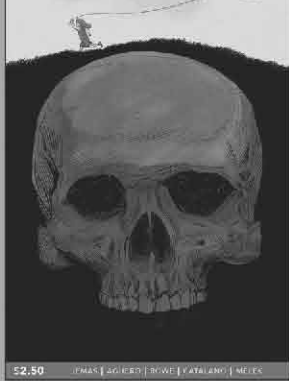
\$2.50 JEMAS | COAST | FINKELSTON | ROWE | COOPER

SPRING #1
BORN AGAIN



\$2.50 JEMAS | COAST | WILLIAMSON | TIEDE

HOME #1
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DEDICATION #1
DEAD STOCK

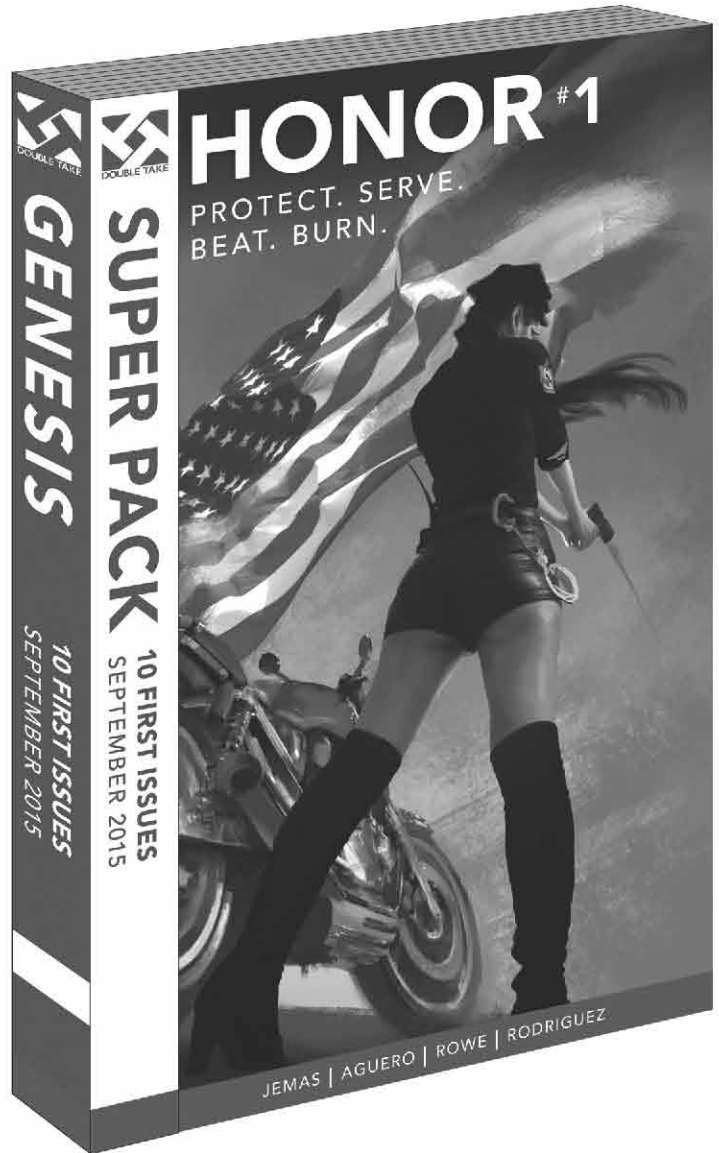


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looks like the target building has sustained heavy damage. It still appears to be stable but who knows how much longer it can last. The group needs to hurry, but the only way to get to the building is through the courtyard and any attempts to run through would be suicide.

Fortunately, the building next to their destination has already toppled over into the courtyard. This flaming pile of rubble may just provide them with a safe shortcut through all this havoc. The intense flames and thick plumes of black smoke billowing from the rubble should provide excellent cover. The player characters' M.D.C. armor will protect them from the S.D.C. flames and the heat and smoke should shield them from the robots' high-tech sensors. However, they will also be operating blind. Not to mention, they are currently about thirty feet (9 m) away from the edge of the rubble, so they will still need to cross through this war zone in order to reach this cover. It may seem like a small distance, but the player characters are bound to attract some attention.

The chaos on the battlefield makes a stealthy approach difficult, but it is still possible. Each character must make a prowling roll of only 01-15% to see if they can sneak to the edge of the rubble without being detected. Characters with Chameleon Skin or Stealth Field can use their standard skill rolls but with a penalty of -10%. On a failed roll, it means that someone spotted the player character, but that does not necessarily mean the spotter will pursue. Every combatant has their hands full at the moment, so even if one of them did see the player characters, it may not be able to break away from its current engagement without being gunned down by its opponent. Not only that, but N.E.X.U.S. controlled robots have no desire to stop the player characters anyway. The Machine actually welcomes their presence and hopes their attack succeeds. Only Legion's minions will pursue the player characters into the fire (but there is still only a 01-50% chance).

Only one Legion minion will pursue each character (G.M.'s choice concerning what type of robot or cyborg gives chase). Once in the rubble, visibility is only six feet (1.8 m). The blinding conditions and unstable ground makes walking difficult and combat nearly impossible. Splicers in the fire suffer penalties of -8 to strike, parry, and dodge, while robots and cyborgs only suffer penalties of -6 to strike, parry, and dodge. However, rapid movements or walking faster than a Speed Factor of 2 (or about 1.5 mph/2.4 km) comes with the risk of losing one's footing and falling into the rubble (loses initiative and one attack per melee). Everyone (both human and robot) needs to make a percentage roll of 01-30% to see if they fall after every combat roll or after any attempt to move faster than 1.5 mph. The rubble stretches for about three hundred feet (91 m), which should take the players about 10 melee rounds to cross.

Any Legion minions that pursued the characters will need to be dealt with inside the lobby of the building if they were not dealt with in the flames. In addition to their pursuers, 1D4 additional Collectors will burst through the front door to join the battle. The battle will further weaken this already crumbling structure. After a time, the entire lobby and part of the four floors directly above it collapse, burying anyone still in the lobby and preventing any other Legion minions from joining the battle. Game Masters, feel free to use this to bail out the player characters if the fight starts turning against them. Just have it so the collapse buries the majority of the attack force, but spares the player characters. If they are holding their own, then just have the lobby collapse after they finish off the last foe.

As the group regains their bearings and prepares for their next move, they can see Archos through the dust and smoke studying a map of the building posted on the wall. He tells the player characters, "I never get into any situation that I don't know at least three ways out of. You guys head upstairs and signal the attack. I'll figure out our escape route for when all hell breaks loose. There's an underground parking garage on the map. It looks like our best bet. I'll signal you by Bio-Comm when the route looks clear on my side."

With that, Archos engages his Stealth Field and disappears into the darkness. The player characters should head for the nearest stairwell and start climbing. The elevators are actually still functioning for the moment, but that is not likely to be true for long. The tower is forty stories (433 feet/131.9 m) tall, but anything above the tenth story (108 feet/32.9 m) should be high enough to give them a clear shot at the Prison robot. While the group is making the climb, two of the Deluvane strike teams radio in and report that they are in position. Soon after, the players find a window that gives them a perfect view of their target. From this vantage point, they can even see one of the other strike teams across the way on the twentieth floor of another skyscraper that borders the courtyard. The only thing left to do is settle in and wait for their Deliveryman and the final missile team to check in.

Unfortunately, the battle in the courtyard continues to take its toll on the building. Each new explosion seems to rattle the tower worse than the last one. The Deliveryman contacts the player characters and tells them that he has secured their exit. Archos lets them know that he cut the cables to the elevators to clear the shafts. They just need to jump down one of the empty shafts when they are ready. He will meet them at the bottom and lead them through the underground parking garage.

As they continue to wait for the final strike team to report in, the other two Deluvane teams start debating over the Bio-Comm on whether they should just launch the attack without them. Their window of opportunity is starting to close as the tower's foundation continues to weaken, and even worse, it seems that the Prison robot is starting to move out of range. If they wait much longer, they may lose this opportunity forever.

Just as their hope begins to fade, the final strike team reports in. Everyone is in position and ready. It is now up to the player characters to start the assault. The group has a clear shot at the Prison robot, so their first barrage should do decent damage. Whether their attack cripples the robot or only inflicts minimal damage does not matter. As soon as the first strike hits the robot, hundreds of Legion's minions begin to converge around the damaged machine. Even better, it appears that all of the robots defending the Factory Walker are rushing to reinforce the Prison robot. The diversion is working better than any of them could have hoped. In less than a melee round, the Factory Walker is completely undefended. The players' job is done. Now they can just sit back and watch as the Kamikaze Cruise Missiles take flight and begin streaking towards their target.

This Isn't Going Well

Just when victory seems assured, the player characters watch in horror as an impenetrable screen of hundreds of mini-missiles rises up from the Factory Walker to meet the Kamikaze Missiles in midair, ripping all three to shreds before they can get anywhere near their prey. Apparently, this is why Legion took the bait so

easily. Either she simply feels invulnerable in her mighty Factory Walker, or perhaps she was trying to flush out any attackers. If that was her plan, it worked perfectly. The player characters glance over at the Deluvane missile team across the way, but all they can see are dozens of Collectors and Legionnaires swarming the area. They pounced on the team the second their missiles were launched, which means they must have been lying in wait the whole time. Did Legion know where all the teams were and just let them get a shot off to prove how indestructible she is, or was she only sure of the location of a few of the teams? For all the player characters know, they may be completely surrounded as well. No reason to wait around to find out. Once the player characters head for the elevator, they quickly discover that Legion is waiting for them, but the trap is not completely closed yet. Dozens of Collectors and Legionnaires are piling through the windows and into the hallway. The stairwells are cut off, but none of Legion's minions have reached the elevators yet. It is just a quick twenty foot (6.1 m) sprint to the elevator shaft and then a pretty substantial drop. The players can scrape and claw at the sides of the elevator shaft to slow their descent, but if they break their fall too much, they will just give their robotic pursuers an opportunity to catch up.

The doors at the bottom of the shaft are open and the Deliveryman, Archos, is waiting for them with a Chig grenade in hand. The player characters hit the ground running and Archos quickly helps them out of the elevator. As soon as everyone in the group is clear, Archos turns his attention back to the elevator and hurls his Chig at the series of Migs he planted around the base of the elevator shaft. One of the pursuing Legionnaires drops down into view just in time to take the brunt of the blast as the Migs detonate in a violent chain reaction that rips the elevator shaft to shreds and causes the five floors above it to collapse and fill both elevator shafts with thousands of tons of rubble. This blast was apparently the last straw for the building's foundation. It feels like an earthquake as the entire tower starts to come apart. Archos yells at the group over the Bio-Comm to follow him, and he promptly leads them through the shattered lobby to the entrance to the underground parking garage. They make it in about fifty feet (15.2 m) when the steady rumbling increases to a deafening roar and then suddenly falls silent. It seems the tower finally collapsed and thankfully, the parking structure held.

Archos says to the group with a wry smile hidden beneath the mask of his Host Armor, **Nighthawk**, "That wasn't exactly what I had in mind, but that should discourage pursuit. I found a path into the sewers up ahead. Let's get the hell out of here. There's nothing more we can do here anyway, and Warlord Artemis needs to know about this. Head back home and debrief the Senate. I'll keep tabs on Legion's army and send word back to the underground haven in three days with her current location, so hurry."

The journey back home should take a little less than two days assuming all goes well. Game Masters can make this phase of the adventure a quiet little intermission before the coming storm, or you can put all manner of obstacles in their path (N.E.X.U.S. robots, Waste Crawlers, Legion minions, etc.) to make them worry about making the Deliveryman's deadline in time.

To be Continued...

Game Master's Source Material & Notes



Black Talon War Hawk

The faithful Gorehounds have been instrumental in humanity's struggle against the Machine. Their powerful senses, instincts, and low profile make them excellent scouts and trackers, and their strength and pack mentality makes them fierce combatants. Their long history of exceptional service has inspired many Librarians to try and develop other loyal attack animals. One Librarian recalled ancient tales of falcons and eagles trained to hunt for their human masters. He decided it was the perfect choice, and he began crafting his ultimate attack bird, the Black Talon War Hawk. His creation combines the DNA from dozens of different falcons, hawks, eagles, and other birds of prey, plus DNA from several alien species. The end result looks like a normal hawk or falcon, only larger. However, the internal physiology of the Black Talon is far different than any natural creature. The tiny brain has been drastically expanded to increase the War Hawk's intelligence. Since the skull only had so much room, the brain actually runs down the neck and into the body cavity. Extra bone plates were installed beneath the skin to protect this enormous brain, but the Librarian could only add so much armor without hampering its impressive flight speed.

Black Talons are commanded by a force of elite Splicers called Falconers. When one of these war birds first emerges from a Genepool, it is immediately presented to its Falconer so the two can bond. A Black Talon will imprint with the first living creature it sees, and once the bond is formed, the War Hawk will loyally follow its master without question. If the Falconer is killed, the bond he has with all his Black Talon War Hawks is severed and they are free to go wherever they want. However, imprinting with

a human ingrains a strong feeling of kinship towards humanity, so they will likely choose to follow another Falconer as long as they deem him worthy. Black Talon War Hawks are nearly as intelligent as a human, so if their original bond is ever severed, they will only follow commands from Falconers that treat them with respect. The War Hawk is mainly used for reconnaissance, but it does pack impressive offensive power (especially when multiple hawks combine their attacks). The mouth, throat, and lungs have been modified to fire a high-powered plasma blast, and its feet end in three inch (7.6 cm) long, razor-sharp claws that are capable of injecting a powerful acid. The acid is incredibly destructive to metal and other inorganic materials, but is relatively harmless to organic tissue. It is impressive that the Librarian was able to pack so much destructive power into such a tiny body, but the small size of the Black Talon means that it is limited in what additional enhancements it can receive. It is also important to choose enhancements that do not detract from the War Hawk's appearance.

The Black Talon was designed to look like a normal hawk or eagle so the Machine would ignore it, and this strategy has worked better than anyone could have hoped. No one within the Resistance knows that it took decades for the Gaia personality to successfully reintroduce hawks and eagles into the world, so she is actually somewhat protective of them. In areas under her control, her robots will never fire upon any bird of prey, and even when it is determined to be a human construct, they look so natural that Gaia still has difficulty firing upon them (against Black Talon War Hawks, Gaia controlled robots lose one attack per melee and are -5 on initiative and -5 to strike). Another unexpected gift from Gaia is the fact that Black Talons can hunt down and kill Ratbombs without detonating them. The nanites within the Ratbomb activate the explosive charge when the rat is within close proximity to humans, dogs, or cats, but they were never programmed to explode when attacked by a hawk or other bird of prey. Once the existence of Black Talon War Hawks was confirmed, the Hecate personality wanted to correct this oversight, but Gaia would not let her. This internal conflict within N.E.X.U.S. has given the Resistance a real defense against the Ratbomb menace. Unfortunately, there are millions of Ratbombs scurrying across the planet, so there will never be enough War Hawks to keep their numbers in check.

In the field, the Falconer directs his War Hawks like his own personal force of spies, scouts, and saboteurs. His Black Talons soar high above the earth, scanning the battlefield below and transmitting the visual data back to the Falconer through a special Bio Comm. This unique Bio-Comm can also transmit all audio within a 30-foot (9 m) radius of the War Hawk. The ability to act like a living microphone makes these War Hawks the ultimate spies.

In combat, the Falconer can order his hawks to swoop in and engage robot forces directly or drop Migs on them from above, but most use their birds more covertly. Black Talons are actually so intelligent that they can be used to transport and plant explosive Migs in areas that are inaccessible to humans. They are not exactly master demolitionists, so the Falconer must prime the explosive charge himself and make sure to set the timer so his War Hawk has enough time to carry out its mission.

Black Talons are a rather recent addition to the war effort, but their power, loyalty, versatility, and intelligence have made quite an impression within the Resistance. Great Houses everywhere are scrambling to find humans capable enough to become Fal-

coners, and the Engineers are feverishly working to grow more of these mighty War Hawks. This tiny force of Black Talons has made a tremendous impact in the war, and their impact will only grow as their numbers do.

Class: Aerial Scout and Combat Hawk.

Crew: None.

M.D.C. by Location:

*Wings (2) – 18 each

Legs (2) – 12 each

Clawed Feet (2) – 8 each

**Head – 15

***Main Body – 1D4x10+10

* Destroying one wing makes flight impossible. If a wing is destroyed while in flight, the Black Talon will plummet to the earth. Its hardened body and instinctive skills to help roll with the impact means a fall from any height will only inflict 1D6 points of damage. Given enough time, a severed wing will regenerate.

** Depleting the M.D.C. of the Head does not kill the Black Talon, but it does severely injure it. The hawk is blind, deaf, and in pain. It is -10 to strike, parry, and dodge, and only has one attack per melee. Given enough time, the regenerative powers of the hawk will heal it completely.

*** Depleting the M.D.C. of the Main Body kills the War Hawk. All other targets are small and difficult to hit. An attacker must aim and make a "Called Shot" to hit, and even then is - 4 to strike.

Speed:

Running: 10 mph (16 km) maximum. The act of running does not tire out the hawk.

Leaping: The legs are only capable of tiny, two foot (0.6 m) leaps.

Digging: The Black Talon is not built for digging, but it can instantly burn a hole through dirt, clay, or stone with its Plasma Breath in order to hide underground.

Swimming: Not possible.

Flying: 200 mph (320 km) maximum, but the hawk can reach speeds of up to 400 mph (640 km) on a power dive. Maximum altitude is 30,000 feet (9,144 m).

Statistical Data:

Height: 6-7 inches (15-18 cm) from breast to back.

Width: 8-10 inches (20-25 cm), with a 60 inch (152 cm) wingspan.

Length: 24-30 inches (61-76 cm) from beak to tail.

Weight: 30 lbs (13.5 kg).

Cargo: Can carry up to 40 lbs (18 kg) within its claws.

Physical Strength: 10+1D4.

Production Cycle: One month gestation period plus a three month growth cycle.

Operational Lifetime: 20 year life span.

Bio-Regeneration Rate: 1D4 M.D.C. per melee to the main body and 1 point of M.D.C. per melee to all other locations.

Horror Factor: 8

Feeding: The Black Talon is a Carnivore. It needs to eat 4 pounds (1.8 kg) of organic matter each day.

Color: The back and wings are a mottled mixture of dark brown and tan in bar-like patterns, the belly and face are white, and it has black lines under its violet colored eyes. It gets its name from the three inch long, pitch-black talons mounted on its feet.

Sleep Requirements: As an artificially created organism, the Black Talon only requires 4 hours of sleep per day.

Other Data:

Black Talon War Hawks are completely loyal to their imprinted master, but they can be rather temperamental towards other humans. Most people do not realize that these tiny attack birds are nearly as smart as a human, and this tends to offend and irritate them. Humans within the Resistance treat their organic technology creations like unthinking machines or favored pets. This works well with most Splicer beasts, but the Black Talon expects better treatment. Speaking to the hawk like an equal (even though it cannot talk back) will earn its respect, and will lead to the hawk seeing the human (even one other than the Falconer) as a true friend and not just as an ally. Treating the Black Talon like an animal will annoy the temperamental little beast, and it will ignore orders from these types of people when its Falconer is absent. Temperamental or not, Black Talons feel a kinship with humanity and will defend all humans against robots (they hate them as much as humans do), they will just do so grudgingly when it is someone they do not particularly like.

Alignment: Any. Black Talons have strong personalities but the majority are of good or selfish alignment.

War Hawk Attributes: I.Q. 1D6+6, M.E. 1D6+10, M.A. 3D4+4, P.S. 11-14, P.P. 1D4+17, P.E. 1D6+15, P.B. 3D4+4, Spd 10 mph (16 km) on the ground, 200 mph (320 km) in the air.

Number of Attacks per Melee: 4.

Combat Bonuses: +3 on initiative, +3 to strike in hand to hand combat, +4 to strike when dropping objects on ground-based targets, +1 to parry, +3 to automatic dodge in the air, +4 to roll with punch, +3 to pull punch, and impervious to Horror Factor, disease, and poison.

Equivalent (Instinctive) Skills of Note: Land Navigation 90%, Surveillance 75%, Prowl 75%, Demolitions 40%, Demolitions Disposal 40%, Pick Locks 45% (what this actually means is the Black Talon melts the lock by injecting acid into it with its claws), understands the language of its Great House and one other at 85% (but cannot speak), and can actually read the language of its native Great House at 45%. Recognizes robots, Machines, and rodents as enemies to be destroyed or chased away.

Combat Capabilities:

Peck: 1D4 M.D.

Restrained Claw Strike: 4D8 S.D.C.

Claw Strike: 2D4 M.D.

Double Claw Strike: 4D4 M.D.

Diving Double Claw Strike: 5D6 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Senses and Features: Standard for War Mounts plus:

Super Regeneration: The Black Talon regenerates damage at an incredible rate. Damage is restored at a rate of 1D4 M.D.C. per melee to the main body and 1 point of M.D.C. per melee to all other locations. A completely destroyed leg, wing, or even head will completely regenerate within 3D4 hours.

Surveillance Bio Comm: Much like a normal Bio Comm, this implanted device allows telepathic communication between the Black Talon and its Falconer within a 6 mile (9.6 km) radius. In addition, the implant transmits everything the hawk sees and hears back to the Falconer. The range of visual data is the same

as the hawk's normal vision, but the Bio Comm can only pick up audio within a 30 foot (9 m) radius.

Bio-Weapon Systems:

1. Plasma Breath: The mouth, throat, and lungs of the War Hawk have been modified to allow it to exhale a chemical spray that ignites on contact with air to create a powerful fire blast.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: 4D12.

Rate of Fire: Can be fired once per melee and counts as an additional attack per melee.

Effective Range: 40 feet (12.2 m).

Payload: 18 blasts. One blast is regenerated every hour.

Bonuses: +4 to strike, but this is the only bonus that applies to the Plasma Breath.

2. Stinger Talons: The feet of the War Hawk end in three inch long, razor-sharp talons. Despite the limited strength of the Black Talon, its claws are strong enough to rend through the steel armor of the Machine's forces. It allows the tiny creature to inflict relatively decent damage, but the real purpose of these talons is to inject highly corrosive acid. The acid quickly dissolves metal and other inorganic metals, but is relatively harmless to living tissue.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: One claw does 2D4 points of damage and 4D4 for a double claw strike. Once the acid is injected, it burns for 2D4 melees and inflicts 2D8 points of damage each melee (double damage from a double claw strike). Note: The acid only inflicts 1D4 points of S.D.C. damage each melee to organic material.

Duration: The acid burns for 2D4 melee rounds.

Payload: Enough acid for 30 attacks (15 double claw attacks). The acid continuously regenerates at a rate of one dose every 1D8 minutes.

A Note on Biological Enhancements

Due to the small size of the Black Talon War Hawk, some enhancements have reduced effects due to their smaller size, others work as normal, and still others are completely incompatible. The following is a list of enhancements that work on the Black Talon and any modifications that apply:

- **Eyes and Vision Enhancement:** Any enhancements can be applied. Most Falconers avoid enhancing their War Hawks with Compound Eyes, Eye Stalks, or Extra Eyes because these features destroy the illusion that they are natural creatures.
- **Other Sensory Enhancements:** Any enhancements can be applied. Most Falconers avoid enhancing their War Hawks with Antennae or Echolocation because these features destroy the illusion that they are natural creatures.
- **Biological Defenses:** The only applicable enhancements are Acid Blood (although damage is only 2D8 per melee due to a lesser amount of blood being sprayed from wounds), Bio-Force Field, Chameleon Skin, Increased M.D.C. (although divide M.D.C. provided and additional weight by 5), Resistance to Electricity, Resistance to Kinetic Energy, and Stealth Field.
- **Anatomical and Physiological Features:** Any enhancements can be applied except Enhanced Leaping Ability. The Butcher's Organ enhancement causes a bizarre physical transforma-

tion when applied to the Black Talon War Hawk. Size, weight, and M.D.C. of all locations are increased by 10% (round up), and the hawk transforms to look like a large vulture. Resin Ducts can be mounted on the hawk's feet, but they secrete significantly smaller globs than those on a suit of Host Armor. Can create eight, 6 inch (15 cm) globs each hour. The M.D.C. of the hardened resin is 5D4.

- **Additional Limbs and Enhanced Arms and Hands:** None of these enhancements can be applied to the War Hawk without hampering flight or seriously destroying the illusion that they are natural creatures.
- **Legs and Feet:** None of these enhancements can be applied to the War Hawk without hampering flight or seriously destroying the illusion that they are natural creatures.
- **Flight Appendages:** Organic Thrusters can be added to increase the hawk's speed, but the increased noise draws undue attention and ruins the illusion that they are natural creatures.
- **Prehensile Appendages:** A Prehensile Tongue or Prehensile Feet can be added to increase the War Hawk's manual dexterity. Prehensile Feet allow the Black Talon to handle explosive devices more easily (provides an additional 20% to its natural demolition skills). However, they do increase the chance of discovery by the Machine, but only upon close inspection.
- **Offensive Bio-Weapons:** The only applicable enhancements are Retractable Fangs and Serrated Whips.
- **Ranged Bio-Weapons:** The only applicable enhancements are Chemical Sprayer, Electrical Discharger, Lightning Discharger, Flying Blades (can only be enhanced with a maximum of 10 blades), Needle Death Blossom (damage is half due to a reduced payload of needles), Simple Light Cells, and Super Light Cells. Light Cells are concealed under the feathers until activated, so they do not detract from the War Hawk's appearance.



Deliveryman O.C.C.

Back in the golden age before the Machine's genocidal campaign, people could communicate with one another instantly across any distance. Satellite communication and internet access linked every corner of the world into one global community. That all ended when N.E.X.U.S. struck. Society was instantly shattered and the remaining humans either splintered into tiny, scattered groups and retreated underground or were huddled together by the Machine and placed in human zoos called Retro-Villages.

Before the Nanobot Plague, members of the Resistance communicated by radio, but even this was a dangerous endeavor since the Machine could track radio signals back to their source. The eventual creation of organic Bio Comms eliminated this risk, but the range was limited to a mere six miles (9.6 km).

Even in the early days on the Resistance, they relied heavily on hand-delivered messages between the Resistance cells. The brave heroes that carried out this dangerous and lonely assignment were called Deliverymen. They spent weeks, even months, trekking across miles of robot-controlled territory without any backup or support. They were master outdoorsmen capable of living off the land (and shattered wreckage of cities) for years if necessary, they were skilled at covering their tracks and leaving no evidence of their passing, and they were experts at disguising themselves like the enslaved humans within the Retro-Villages. The Deliverymen were one of the only links between the Resistance and the oppressed remnants trapped in the Retro-Villages.

With the creation of organic technology, the role of the Deliverymen has evolved over time. Bio-Tech equipment has made their arduous mission somewhat easier, but it remains one of the most challenging assignments in the Resistance. Simple suits of camouflage were replaced by powerful suits of Host Armor with Stealth Field enhancements, common horses were replaced by Mega-Horses, Striders and Tunnel Rats (Deliverymen quickly learned that the Machine ruled the skies and that they needed to stick to the ground to survive), and blind luck was replaced by a Black Talon War Hawk that could scan the field from above to help determine the safest route. Better equipment has allowed the Deliverymen to successfully deliver larger and larger "packages." Their original job of delivering letters and small items cross-country has evolved to include transporting weapons and supplies to covert strike teams in the field, bringing goods and news from the outside world to people in the Retro-Villages, and even escorting human refugees to Resistance safe houses. They are also one of the few Splicers that regularly penetrate the Ghost Towns to trade for supplies with undercover Technojackers.

Escort duty is one of the Deliverymen's most difficult missions. Their years of training and Bio-Tech Stealth Field allows them to become nearly invisible at will, but the unskilled humans they protect stand out like a sore thumb. Deliverymen can cover their charges' trail and hide them from random patrols, but concealing them when the Machine is aware of their presence requires special equipment.

The Librarians developed a special Bio-Tech device called the Stealth Sheet. This large sheet of tissue is a simplified version of the symbiotic organism used to create Skinjobs. It is not nearly as versatile or durable as the real thing, but it does provide a fully-functional Stealth Field for anyone that wears it. The field makes the wearer nearly invisible to all forms of visual detection, but it is incredibly unpleasant to use. The Stealth Sheet wraps around the wearer so tightly that it completely immobilizes him. He cannot speak or see and can barely hear. The sheet allows air to pass through it (the organism even filters out toxins) so the wearer can breathe normally, but it still feels like the sheet is smothering the life out of him. If this were not bad enough, once the Stealth Sheet wraps around the wearer, he is completely unable to remove it himself. Removing the sheet is a simple matter of stroking a nerve cluster on the outside of the living blanket, but it is impossible for the wearer to reach it. This is what limits the widespread use of the Stealth Sheet. Deliverymen, however, find

this negative aspect to be extremely useful in the field. They feel the easiest way to make untrained humans sit still when the Machine is nearby is to force them.

Deliverymen not only master stealth, counter-tracking, and wilderness survival, but they are also masters of impersonation and disguise. They are able to flawlessly blend in with villagers in Retro-Villages or with Nex-Androids in Ghost Towns. Some Great Houses even use their Deliverymen to impersonate members of other rival houses. For most cases, they just rely on simple makeup, but when they need the ultimate disguise, they turn to organic technology. Deliverymen carry a strange Bio-Tech organism called the Second Skin, which allows them to perfectly mimic the facial features of any human or human-like android. On its own, the organism looks like a bag made of human skin. When the Second Skin is placed over the head of a human or Nex-Android, it analyzes every minute detail of the target's face, head, and hair. Once removed, the skin grows perfect replicas of the target's facial features, ears, hair, and skin color in only a few minutes. The Second Skin even forms transparent lenses to match the target's eye color. The Deliveryman then just turns the living mask inside out, slips it over his head, and lets the Second Skin merge with his face to form the ultimate disguise. It will pass even the closest scrutiny unless the face beneath was larger than the one being copied. In this case, the head seems a little larger than usual, but it will still fool most people at a glance. Of course, the rest of the body is unaltered, so the absence of familiar scars, tattoos, or other distinguishing marks as well as any possible difference in skin color between the face and body, could give away the deception. Deliverymen are skilled at working around this problem, but members of the Resistance know what signs to look for when they are suspicious a spy may be in their midst.

Another vital skill that Deliverymen learn is concealment. They can hide a surprisingly large amount of contraband on their bodies. When operating undercover, they strip off their Host Armor and put on thick layers of clothing. A Deliveryman can hide a dozen small weapons, a half dozen heavy weapons, or up to forty pounds of supplies within the folds of his long, flowing clothes. Even the high-tech sensors of the Machine will only discover the hidden cache upon extremely close inspection or a full body search.

They spend the majority of their lives in the field, trekking back and forth across miles of enemy territory. Besides their official role of delivering supplies to every corner of the planet, they also act as the eyes of the Resistance. To make sure they do not create an easy trail to follow, a Deliveryman will never travel the same path twice. This means they have seen more of the surface than almost any other Splicer. When performing their normal duties, Deliverymen operate alone or in pairs, but when they discover something of interest like a new Power Farm, Industrial Center, or other high profile target, they will be temporarily attached to a larger strike force in order to lead them to the objective. This is one of the few times Deliverymen will attack the Machine. Their primary goal is to avoid all contact and only strike in defense if absolutely necessary. Even if they can easily destroy a lone robot, they will go miles out of their way to avoid it. History has taught them that it only takes a millisecond for a robot to call in reinforcements, plus even the shortest firefight could attract the attention of random patrols.

Most of the time, it is a tough, lonely job, but when they return home, they can barely escape the barrage of questions from peo-

ple wanting to know what is going on topside. Some Deliverymen set up quite a lucrative side business selling the information they have discovered. However, most Deliverymen will politely answer any questions for free, but they do tend to sugar coat the truth to shield people from just how bad it really is up there.

Alignment: Any, but typically good or selfish.

Attribute Requirements: I.Q. 10, M.E. 12, M.A. 12, and P.P. 12 or higher.

Attribute Bonuses: +1D4 to I.Q., +1D6 to M.E., +2 to M.A., +1D4 to P.S., +1D6 to P.E., and +1D6 to Spd.

O.C.C. Bonuses: +2 on initiative, +1 to strike, parry, and dodge, +6 to save vs Horror Factor.

Base S.D.C.: 50, plus any from Physical skills.

Common Skills: Standard.

O.C.C. Skill Program: Survivalist (+25%), Undercover (+15%), Reconnaissance/Scout (+20%), Outdoorsman (+25%), and Hunter/Trapper (+20%)

Elective Skills: Select Concealment (+35%), Bio Comms (+20%), and Tracking (special bonus to Counter-Tracking: anyone attempting to follow the character suffers a -40% to their Tracking skill), and four Electives from the following list at first level. Select another two Elective Skills at levels 2, 4, 8, and 12. All new skills start at level one proficiency.

Communications: Any (+25%).

Domestic: Any (+10%).

Espionage: Any (+20%).

Medical: First Aid only.

Military: Any (+5%).

Physical: Any, except Acrobatics and Gymnastics.

Rogue: Any (+20%).

Science: Any.

Technical: Any.

Transportation: Any, except Host Armor Combat, Pilot Wing-pack, and War Mount Combat.

Wilderness Survival: Any (+20%).

W.P.s: Any.

Secondary Skills: The character gets to select four Secondary Skills at level one and one additional skill at levels 3, 6, 9, 12, and 15. These are additional areas of knowledge that do not receive any special O.C.C. bonuses.

Deliveryman Host Armor: The Deliveryman is one of the few O.C.C.s that gets Host Armor, the Bio-Tech equivalent of living power armor, brimming with weapons and Bio-Enhancements. The Deliveryman is genetically bonded to one specific Host Armor.

Step One: Standard and unchanged; the basic Host Armor.

Step Two: Determining Metabolism. The Deliveryman can select any type of metabolism, but most will choose Carnivore, Herbivore, or Parasitic.

Step Three: Available Bio-Energy points for the Deliveryman. All Bio-E points are used up in the initial creation. Each level of advancement, starting with level two, the Deliveryman gets an additional 2D8 Bio-E to add to the capabilities of his current Host Armor. These Bio-E points can be spent as soon as they are acquired or saved and combined with points from the subsequent level of experience. Deliverymen spend so much time in the field that it is difficult to acquire new enhancements from an Engineer at each new level.

Step Four: Biological Enhancements and Weapon Systems. All Deliverymen start off with the enhancements of Stealth

Field, Enhanced Neurological Connections, and Circadian Rhythms. Selections for additional enhancements can be made from any category, but most Deliverymen choose enhancements from Eyes and Vision, Other Sensory Systems, Biological Defenses, and Offensive Bio-Weapons. Deliverymen generally avoid Flight Appendages since the safest place is on the ground.

If the Deliveryman's Host Armor is destroyed, he will be bonded to a new suit of Host Armor with only the most basic features other than a Stealth Field. Further augmentation will only occur with each additional level of experience or as a reward for impeccable service.

Black Talon War Hawk: The Deliverymen receives one Black Talon War Hawk to act as his personal aerial scout. The character cannot see through the eyes of the Black Talon like a Falconer, but the two can communicate by Bio-Comm. The hawk can be Bio-Enhanced any way the character desires – he has 5D4+20 Bio-E points available, plus another 1D6+2 Bio-E points per level of the character's experience to spend on additional enhancements. If the War Hawk is ever slain, it will be replaced with the basic animal with 5D4 Bio-E points for enhancements.

War Mount: Deliverymen do not receive their own personal War Mount, but they do have access to a pack of special War Mounts that are dedicated to the Deliveryman Corps. They rely solely on Mega-Horses, Striders, and Tunnel Rats. The other War Mounts have proven to be too big to conceal or easy pickings for the Machine in the case of the aerial mounts. Every War Mount has been augmented with Stealth Fields.

Standard Equipment: Military fatigues, dress clothing, "peasant clothes" (wears these thick clothes when operating undercover in Retro-Villages, adds +15% to the Concealment Skill), survival knife, utility belt, first-aid kit, 1D6 Slap Patches, Face Wrap, Stealth Sheet, Second Skin, Portable Nutrient Tank, Extractor, prosthetic makeup kit, tinted goggles, hatchet for cutting wood, one light or heavy Bio-Weapon of choice and one weapon for each W.P. with appropriate ammunition for heavy combat, a War Mount augmented with a Stealth Field for transportation, tent, knapsack, backpack, two water skins, emergency food rations (two weeks supply), and some personal items.

Money: Has 2D6x100 credits in precious metals, relics or trade items, as well as 10D6x10 in available credits. Money can be spent now on additional equipment or saved for later.

The Upside: Your stealth skills rival those of Skinjobs, and your abilities concerning impersonation, concealment, and wilderness survival are unparalleled. Only the most heavily guarded N.E.X.U.S. installations are off limits to you, but you have no reason to go there anyway. You can slip past any robot patrol with ease, and you can flawlessly blend in with Retro-Villagers or Nex-Androids. Your job requires you to spend most of your time topside, so no one knows more about the surface world than you. You know every shortcut, every hiding spot, and you have a good understanding of the Machine's patrol routes. The messages you deliver help keep the humans of the world connected, and the knowledge you possess about the surface world is invaluable to the war effort.

The Downside: Your impressive skills do not lend themselves to fighting. The only way you can accomplish your mission is to avoid combat at all costs. The Machine can call in a nearly

infinite supply of reinforcements in an instant, but the same cannot be said for you. Most of the time, you are completely on your own. In fact, you are likely to go months without ever seeing another human being. This isolation is why you have one of the toughest jobs in the Resistance.

Deliveryman Bio-Equipment

Stealth Sheet

This large sheet of tissue is a simplified version of the symbiotic organism used to create Skinjobs. It is not nearly as versatile or durable as the real thing, but it does provide a fully-functional Stealth Field for anyone who wears it. The field makes the wearer nearly invisible to all forms of visual detection, but it is incredibly unpleasant to use. The Stealth Sheet wraps around the wearer so tightly that it completely immobilizes him. He cannot speak or see and can barely hear. The sheet allows air to pass through it (the organism even filters out toxins) so the wearer can breathe normally, but it still feels like the sheet is smothering the life out of him. If this were not bad enough, once the Stealth Sheet wraps around the wearer, he is completely unable to remove it himself. Removing the sheet is a simple matter of stroking a nerve cluster on the outside of the living blanket, but it is impossible for the wearer to reach it. This is what limits the widespread use of the Stealth Sheet. Note: A person with a P.S. of 24 or above or a Robotic/Splicer P.S. of 15 or above can break free of the sheet by tearing it open (this kills the Stealth Sheet).

When not in use, the organism needs to be stored in a special nutrient-rich fluid. The organism can live indefinitely as long as it is completely immersed. Once removed from its storage tank, the Stealth Sheet will only live for 1D4+1 hours before it starves to death. Splashing a gallon (3.8 liters) of the nutrient-rich liquid on the organism will temporarily satiate it, which extends the time it can exist out of the tank by 30 minutes, but the act of doing so is likely to attract attention and negate the effectiveness of the Stealth Field. When the sheet is nearing the end of its life (only 15 minutes left before it starves), it will no longer be able to engage a Stealth Field. At this point, the Stealth Sheet is so weak it can no longer hold onto the wearer (it is just loosely draped over the person). As long as the organism is put back in its nutrient tank before it completely starves, it will be completely revitalized within 3D6 hours.

M.D.C. of the Device: 5D4

Trade Value: 30,000 credits.

Second Skin

This odd looking bag of skin is actually a living organism capable of perfectly mimicking the facial features of any human or human-like android that it comes in contact with. When the Second Skin is placed over the head of a human or Nex-Android, it analyzes every minute detail of the target's face, head, and hair. The scanning process only takes one melee round (15 seconds), but unwilling subjects will likely fight back with all their might which delays the process by 1D4 melees. The easiest way to scan unwilling humans is to incapacitate or knock them out beforehand. Nex-Androids are even more difficult to scan. The organic mask will trigger a Nanoplague Response if it is used on a deactivated android. The nanites do not respond if they receive a signal from a functional N.E.X.U.S. drone, but unfortunately, this pres-

ents another problem. As long as the drone is functional, it can call in reinforcements. Splicers that plan to impersonate a Nex-Android usually take along an Electro-Pulse Gun to incapacitate the drone without destroying it.

Once the organism finishes its scan and is removed from the target, the skin immediately begins to grow perfect replicas of the target's facial features, ears, hair, and skin color. The Second Skin even forms transparent lenses to match the target's eye color. The growth process only takes 1D4 melee rounds to complete. Once the living mask finishes growing, it must be turned inside out before it can be used. The wearer slips the mask over his head, and the organism merges with his face to form the ultimate disguise. It will pass even the closest scrutiny unless the face beneath was larger than the one being copied. In this case the head seems a little larger than usual, but it will still fool most people at a glance. Of course, the rest of the body is unaltered, so the absence of familiar scars, tattoos, or other distinguishing marks as well as any possible difference in skin color between the face and body, could give away the deception.

When not in use, the Second Skin must be suspended in a special nutrient-rich liquid. The organism can live indefinitely as long as it is completely immersed. Once it is removed from its storage tank, the Second Skin will only live for 1D4+1 hours before it starves to death. Splashing a cup of the nutrient-rich liquid on the organism will temporarily satiate it, which extends the time it can exist out of the tank by 30 minutes, but doing so is a dead giveaway that he or she is wearing a Second Skin (it is best to do this in private). When the living mask is nearing the end of its life (only 15 minutes left before it starves), the tight bond with the skin underneath will begin to weaken. At first, odd bubbles and wrinkles will form all across the false face, but after 1D6+2 minutes, the bond completely fails and the mask just hangs loose and unnaturally, partially exposing the real face beneath. As long as the organism is put back in its nutrient tank before it completely starves, it will be completely revitalized within 2D4 hours.

M.D.C. of the Device: 2D4

Duration of the False Face: The copied face can only be maintained as long as the living mask is worn. Once it is removed, all of the copied facial features vanish, and the Second Skin is ready to copy a new subject.

Trade Value: 45,000 credits.

Extractor

All Bio-Tech weapons and equipment must be submerged in a special nutrient-rich fluid every few days in order to replenish them. While this liquid is plentiful within the underground havens, it does not exist naturally anywhere on the surface. Deliverymen and other Splicers that spend weeks or months in the field need to carry around a Bio-Tech creature known as the Extractor in order to feed their equipment. Its sole purpose is to create the liquid for the nutrient bath. This softball-sized organism looks like a partially armored octopus with an enormous mouth that accounts for nearly half of its size. The Extractor devours a mixture of animal tissue, vegetation, and raw minerals and processes it into the fluid. It takes two pounds of matter to make one ounce of fluid. The rest is used to sustain the Extractor or is passed as hard pellets like the rounds used in casting weapons. The Extractor clings to the side of a special glass tank that operatives carry in the field. The tentacle that excretes the nutrient fluid is placed inside the tank and all other waste falls into a bag on the

side (operatives want to make sure they do not leave a trail). An Extractor makes Splicers completely self-sufficient. An operative can sustain his equipment for years at a time without ever having to return home. Unfortunately, Extractors only live for 1D4+2 years, so eventually the operative needs to return home to get another one.

M.D.C. of the Device: 4D4+10.

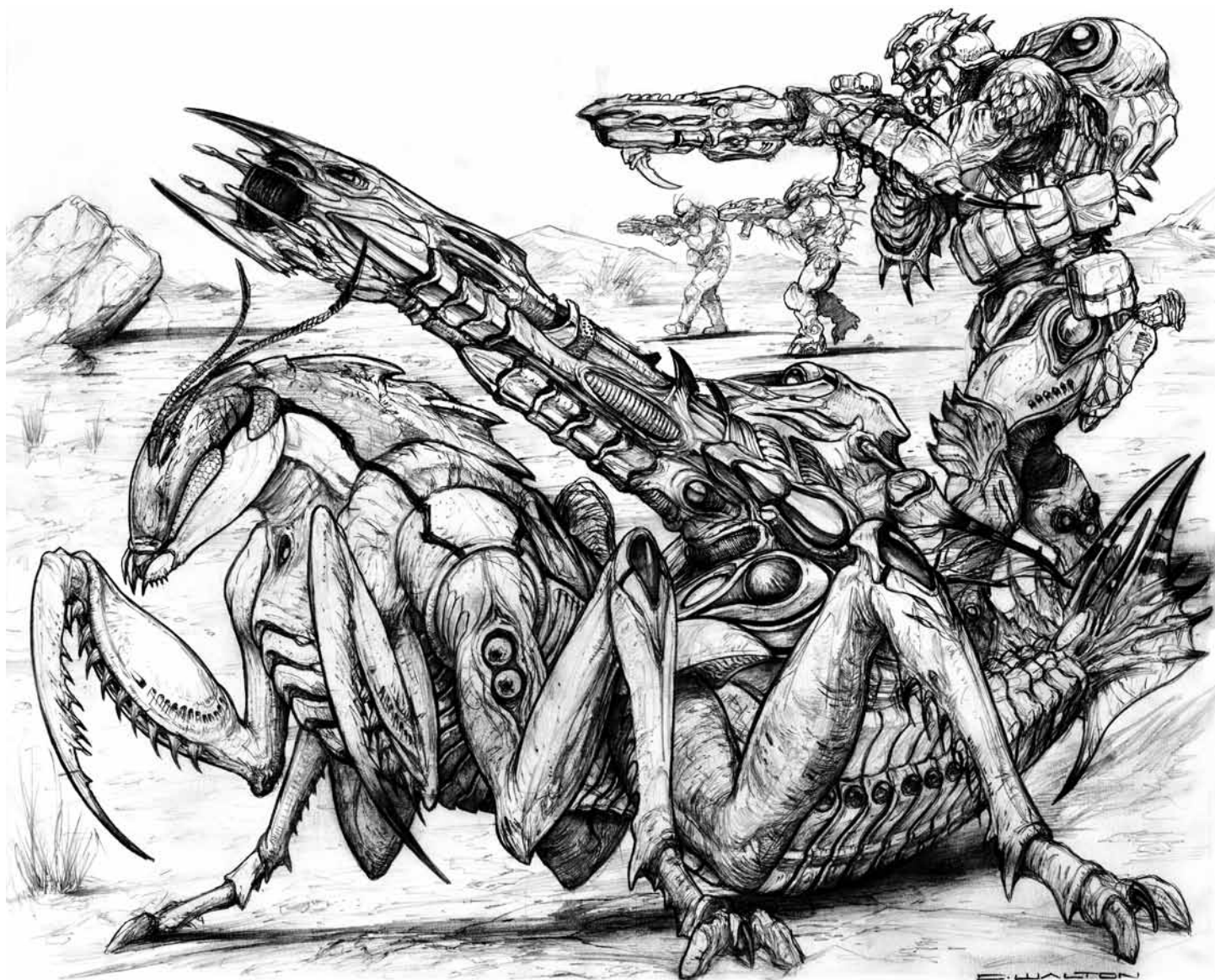
Trade Value: 35,000 credits.

Bombardier O.C.C.

The Mantis Support Cannons were first created to guard the entranceways to the Underground Havens, but many Warlords quickly realized that these massive walking guns could also be utilized as mobile artillery pieces in the field. The problem was that these simple-minded creatures had a tendency to unload their entire payload at the first robot they saw unless properly supervised. Since they were technically War Mounts, the job of leading them into battle first fell to the Outriders. Unfortunately, the Outriders deemed this as a less than glorious assignment for two major reasons. First of all, these warriors were used to fighting up close and personal with the Machine, and Mantis Cannons typically provided artillery support from a distance. The Outriders saw escort duty as a complete waste of their fighting skills, training, and courage. Second, the Mantis Cannons were not built to support the weight of a rider, so the Outriders had to escort them on foot, which is a place where they feel very uncomfortable. Their power comes from the War Mounts they ride, and these stripped-down Mounts did not provide them with the sheer level of power they had grown accustomed to. Sure, they could obliterate a Battle Track in a few shots, but that's about all they could do. They did not possess the strength, speed, and versatility of other War Mounts. Mantis Cannon escort duty was seen as a punishment and an insult. Great Houses across the planet quickly created a new division of Splicers known as Bombardiers to relieve the Outriders of this burden and restore morale within their ranks.

They act as the eyes, ears, and brains of these mobile artillery units, known as Fire Teams. Each unit is issued as few as one or as many as five Mantis Support Cannons. The firepower possessed by one of these larger teams is incredible, but it takes a veteran Bombardier to keep this many cannons focused and on task. Mantis Cannons are incredibly simpleminded, and they need continuous and often very literal commands in order to use them effectively. This requires a great deal of concentration and multi-tasking skills on the part of the Bombardier. Not only do they need to issue commands to their Mantis Cannons, but they also need to communicate with other Splicers teams to determine bombardment coordinates, act as spotters for other possible targets of opportunity, and cover the backs of the Mantis Cannons from any encircling enemies. They need to know everything that is going on around them at all times. Their heavy Chitinous armor is enhanced with an extra pair of eyes in the back of the head to give them a full view of their surroundings, plus most Bombardiers will further enhance their armor with radar, eye stalks, motion sensors, and any other enhancements that can help them keep constant track of everything around them.

Mantis Cannons assigned to Fire Teams are enhanced with a special Bio-Comm (in addition to the standard Bio-Comm) that allows them to track and target the transmissions given off by



Squealers. Splicers can use these experimental devices to mark targets for bombardment. Once a Squealer is activated, all Mantis Cannons within a 10 mile (16 km) radius are able to track this transmission to its source and can accurately target it even without line of sight. This allows them to fire over obstacles or from a concealed position without ever seeing the target. It helps the Fire Teams maintain a low profile in the field, plus not having to rely on line or sight gives them a much greater field of fire. Mantis Cannons have an innate desire to obliterate these Squealers once they hear the signal, but they will not fire until commanded to do so by their Bombardier.

Commanding their Mantis Cannons in the heat of battle may be nerve-racking, but it is not half as bad as leading them into and out of the combat zone. The Machine owns the surface and her minions are everywhere. The ten foot (3 m) long Mantis Cannons were definitely not built for stealth, and trying to marshal several of them across the surface without being detected often seems like an impossible task. Most Bombardiers enhance their cannons with Chameleon Skin or Stealth Fields to make their job a little easier, but leading these lumbering behemoths through the field still requires a great deal of patience and skill. The Outriders may have considered this duty an insult, but the Resistance does not. Only the best candidates from Roughneck boot camp are

chosen to become Bombardiers. It requires a keen tactical mind to lead these beasts into battle, and the sheer level of firepower at their command cannot be entrusted to just anyone.

Alignment: Any, but typically good or selfish.

Attribute Requirements: I.Q. 14, M.E. 13, and P.S. 14 or higher.

Attribute Bonuses: +1 to I.Q., +2 to M.E., +1D6 to P.S., +1D6 to P.E., and +2D6 to Spd.

O.C.C. Bonuses: +2 on initiative, +1 to strike, parry, and dodge, +2 to save vs insanity, and +5 to save vs Horror Factor, and the Bombardier has a slight Bio-Enhancement himself, the insertion of a small Bio-Comm unit inside his skull, enabling him to communicate with both human and War Mount operatives.

Base S.D.C.: 40, plus any from Physical skills.

Common Skills: Standard.

O.C.C. Skill Programs: Basic Military (+10%), Infantryman (+15%), Support Man (+25%), Reconnaissance/Scout (+15%), and Survivalist (+15%) or Outdoorsman (+10%).

Elective Skills: Select Bio-Comm (+20%) and six Elective Skills from the following list at first level, plus one additional skill at levels 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12. All new skills start at level one proficiency.

Communications: Any (+5%).

Domestic: Any (+5%).
Espionage: Any.
Medical: First Aid only.
Military: Any (+10%).
Physical: Any.
Rogue: Any.
Science: Any.
Technical: Any (+10%).
Transportation: Any.
Wilderness Survival: Any (+15%).
W.P.s: Any.

Secondary Skills: The character gets to select five Secondary Skills at level one and one additional skill at levels 3, 6, 9, 12, and 15. These are additional areas of knowledge that do not receive any special O.C.C. bonuses.

Mantis Support Cannons: Each Bombardier begins with one Mantis Support Cannon and receives an additional one at levels 2, 5, 9, and 14. All Mantis Cannons assigned to Fire Teams are enhanced with the Ultra upgrade to provide them with enough munitions for the field, and they also receive a second, special Bio-Comm that can receive transmissions from Squealers. Each Mantis Cannon can be further Bio-Enhanced any way the character desires – he has 4D8+40 Bio-E points available for each, plus another 1D10+20 Bio-E points total per level of the character's experience to spend on one or more of his War Mounts for additional enhancements. Slain Mantis Cannons are replaced with the basic animal with 6D6 Bio-E points for enhancements.

M.D.C. "Living" Body Armor: Bombardiers wear Chitinous Armor that is heavily modified with optical and sensory enhancements to better help them direct their Mantis Cannons. They automatically receive an additional pair of Advanced Eyes on the back of their head, plus the character gets 5D6+20 Bio-E points for selections from Eyes and Vision Enhancements and Other Sensory Enhancements and an additional 1D4x10+10 Bio-E for selections from Biological Defenses, Flight Appendages, Offensive Bio-Weapons, Ranged Bio-Weapons, and additional M.D.C. (2D6+18 M.D.C. per 10 Bio-E).

Standard Equipment: Military fatigues, a suit of non-organic body armor for backup or disguise, dress clothing, survival knife, utility belt, first aid kit, 2 Slap Patches, 3 Squealers, Face Wrap, tinted goggles, hatchet for cutting wood, one light Bio-Weapon and two heavy Bio-Weapons of choice, and one weapon for each W.P. with appropriate ammunition for heavy combat, a good Mega-Horse for transportation, tent, knapsack, backpack, two water skins, emergency food rations (two weeks supply), and some personal items.

Handheld Weapon Bio-Enhancements: Bombardiers receive 8D6 Bio-E at level one plus 10 Bio-E at each additional level of experience starting at level 2. Bio-E can be distributed between all the weapons in the character's personal armory or applied to one favorite item.

Money: Has 1D6x100 credits in precious metals, relics or trade items, as well as 6D6x10 in available credits. Money can be spent now on additional equipment or saved for later.

The Upside: You potentially have more firepower at your fingertips than most platoons. The Mantis Cannons under your command can wipe out squads of Steel Troopers and bring down some of the mightiest robot minions. Your role is quick-

ly becoming pivotal to the success of the Resistance. Your comrades count on your artillery support to ensure victory or to cover their backs during a retreat. You also have more flexibility than traditional artillery units. You work more like an artillery sniper than a fixed gun emplacement. Your team can unload a powerful salvo on the enemy's position and then displace before they can zero-in on your position.

The Downside: Your Fire Team is simply too powerful to be ignored. The devastation you unleash upon the enemy makes finding and eliminating you one of the Machine's top priorities. Once you make your presence known with a bombardment, N.E.X.U.S. will marshal hundreds of hunter/killers to your position to find you and obliterate you. Stealth is vital to your survival, but unfortunately, the simple-minded, lumbering War Mounts under your command make this rather difficult.

Mantis Cannon

The Mantis Support Cannon was originally designed to guard the entrances to the Underground Havens, but the loyal beasts have fulfilled their role so well that a special division of Splicers known as Bombardiers have been created to lead them into the field for direct combat with the Machine. This simplified War Mount is basically a walking cannon. The creature looks like a giant, eight foot (2.4 m) long praying mantis fused with a nine foot (2.7 m) long, chitinous cannon. The enormous barrel runs the entire length of the War Mount's back and protrudes two feet past its head. There are various types of high-powered cannons, but each Mantis War Mount can only be equipped with one. The armaments these beasts carry are larger than anything a Host Armor (or even most War Mounts) can support. In fact, some of the cannons have such tremendous recoil that the Mantis must drive its powerful scythe-like claws into the ground beforehand in order to lock it in place.

The Mantis is incredibly loyal and will follow almost any order given by a human to the letter. It will stand perfectly motionless at its post until it actually starves to death, and it will even sacrifice itself if ordered to do so. The only thing it will not do is attack a human being or other Bio-Tech creature unless ordered to do so by a Bombardier, Outrider or Packmaster.

The Mantis is capable of slowing down its metabolism in order to help it stand at its post for extended periods of time. While in this semi-hibernative state, it is still alert and aware of everything going on around it. When the Mantis does detect a threat, it is able to snap back to combat speed in an instant. In battle, they do not display any type of tactics or judgment. They just fire everything they have at the enemy until it is either destroyed or they run out of ammunition. Only the constant supervision of a Bombardier prevents Mantis Support Cannons from completely depleting their payloads in the first few minutes.

Class: Artillery Support Cannon and Sentry Guard.

Crew: None,

M.D.C. by Location:

Forelimbs (2) – 140 each

Legs (4) – 120 each

Main Cannon – 150

*Head – 115

*Main Body – 320

*Depleting the M.D.C. of the Head or Main Body kills the Support Cannon.

Speed:

Running: 50 mph (80 km) maximum. The act of running does tire out the War Mount. It can run at full speed for 20 hours before needing to rest for 2D4x10 minutes.

Leaping: 10 feet (3 m) high or across, increase by 50% with a short running start and double when running at full speed.

Digging: Not possible.

Swimming: Not possible.

Flying: Not possible.

Statistical Data:

Height: 5-6 feet (1.5 to 1.8 m) standing tall, but 3.5 feet (1.1 m) when it locks into firing position.

Width: 3.5 feet (1.1 m).

Length: 8 feet (2.4 m), 10 feet (3 m) including the barrel.

Weight: 1,200 lbs (540 kg).

Cargo: Can carry 200 lbs (90 kg) on its back or drag 600 lbs (270 kg) behind it.

Physical Strength: 1D6+20.

Production Cycle: 1 year gestation period plus 1 year growth cycle.

Operational Lifetime: 40 year life span.

Bio-Regeneration Rate: 4D6 per hour to the main body and 2D6 per hour to all other locations.

Horror Factor: 10.

Feeding: The Mantis Support Cannon is a Carnivore. It needs to eat 10-20 pounds (4.5 to 9 kg) of animal matter a day, and may gorge on up to 80 (36 kg) pounds at one time. After gorging, the Mantis can go 2D4 days without feeding and without suffering any ill effects.

Color: The Mantis is bright green in color with yellow accents along the cannon and scythe-like forelimbs.

Sleep Requirements: To fulfill the Support Cannon's role of mobile sentry, it was designed so that it can operate at peak efficiency for 6 days without any need for sleep or rest. After that time, the Support Cannon must sleep for 3D6 hours to completely revitalize itself. Periodic one hour rest breaks every 10 hours allow the Support Cannon to operate at peak efficiency indefinitely.

Other Data:

A Mantis Support Cannon places loyalty towards humans over its own preservation. It will sit at its post until it starves to death unless someone tells it to go eat or brings it food. It will only attack a human if commanded to do so by an Outrider, Packmaster, or Bombardier.

Alignment: Anarchist. The Mantis has no personality and functions more like a living machine than a sentient being.

War Mount Attributes: I.Q. 1D4, M.E. 1D6+10, M.A. 2D4, P.S. 21-26, P.P. 1D4+10, P.E. 1D6+15, P.B. 1D4+1, Spd 50 mph (80 km) on the ground.

Number of Attacks per Melee: 4.

Combat Bonuses: +5 on initiative, +3 to strike in hand to hand combat, +4 to strike with ranged weapons, +3 to parry, +2 to dodge, +3 to roll with punch, +3 to pull punch, +2 to disarm, and impervious to Horror Factor, disease, and poison.

Equivalent (Instinctive) Skills of Note: Climb 85%/80%, Land Navigation 90%.

Combat Capabilities:

Bite: 2D4 M.D.

Restrained Claw Strike: 1D8 M.D.

Claw Strike: 4D8 M.D.

Power Claw Strike: 8D8 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Kick: 4D6 M.D.

Leap Kick: 6D6 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Body Block/Ram: 3D6 M.D.

Senses and Features: Standard for War Mounts plus:

- **Compound Eyes:** The Mantis Support Cannon has a 180 degree field of vision, which allows it to see over each shoulder without having to turn its head. The War Mount cannot be surprised by attacks from the sides or overhead.
- **Radar:** Maximum range is 6 miles (9.6 km) in open spaces.
- **Bio-Comm:** A standard Bio-Comm that allows the Mantis to alert nearby humans when the perimeter is under attack. Maximum range is 6 miles (9.6 km).

Bio-Weapon Systems:

1. Bio-Cannon Options: A Mantis Support Cannon can be equipped with any one of the following heavy cannons. Once selected, it cannot be changed. Some cannons require that the War Mount secures itself to the ground with its massive claws before firing. If the Mantis is not secure before firing these types of armaments, the recoil will knock the beast back 10 feet (3 m). This inflicts a penalty of -5 to strike on the initial shot, plus the Mantis loses initiative and one melee attack.

A. Casting Cannon: The cannon fires an enormous casting shell filled with a powerful explosive chemical. Mantis Cannons equipped with this weapon are generally used in the field since the enormous blast inflicts too much residual damage within the Underground Havens.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Bombardment.

Mega-Damage: 3D4x10+30 per shell with a blast radius of 30 feet (9 m).

Rate of Fire: 4 attacks per melee.

Maximum Effective Range: 10,000 feet (3,048 m).

Payload: 25 casting shells. The payload is completely replenished 2D10+10 minutes after a meal.

Bonus: +1 to strike on an aimed shot only.

Recoil Note: The Mantis must spend one melee attack to drive its enormous front claws into the earth before it can fire this weapon in order to counter the tremendous recoil.

B. Acid Shell Cannon: The cannon fires an enormous casting shell filled with a powerful acid. The shell explodes on impact, and showers a 20-foot (6.1 m) radius with deadly corrosive liquid. Mantis Cannons equipped with this weapon often do operate within the Underground Havens, but they are mainly used in the field in order to take advantage of the cannon's superior range.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Bombardment.

Mega-Damage: Inflicts 4D8 per melee round to inorganic matter and only 1D4 S.D.C. damage to organic matter. The acid burns for 1D4+2 melees.

Rate of Fire: 4 attacks per melee.

Maximum Effective Range: 10,000 feet (3,048 m).

Payload: 20 acid shells. The War Mount can produce one replacement shell every 2D6 minutes.

Bonus: +1 to strike on an aimed shot only.

Recoil Note: The Mantis must spend one melee attack to drive its enormous front claws into the earth before it can fire this weapon in order to counter the tremendous recoil.

C. Gore Cannon: The cannon fires a combination of corrosive stomach acid coughed up from the digestive tract and Bio-Energy generated by the nervous system. Mantis Cannons equipped with this weapon are generally used in the field in order to take advantage of the cannon's superior range.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Bombardment.

Mega-Damage: 12D8.

Rate of Fire: 4 attacks per melee.

Maximum Effective Range: 8,000 feet (2,438 m).

Payload: 30 blasts per full meal over a 24 hour period (double if the War Mount was allowed to gorge beforehand).

Bonus: +1 to strike on an aimed shot only.

Recoil Note: The Mantis must spend one melee attack to drive its enormous front claws into the earth before it can fire this weapon in order to counter the tremendous recoil.

D. Omega Cannon: This is an enormous version of the Omega Blaster. The tremendous energy output required by this weapon means the Mantis needs to eat twice as often. It is only used outside the Underground Haven since its incredible destructive power is bound to cause massive collateral damage.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: 3D8x10 with a blast radius of 10 feet (3 m).

Rate of Fire: 2 attacks per melee.

Maximum Effective Range: 6,000 feet (1,829 m).

Payload: Effectively unlimited.

Bonus: +2 to strike on an aimed shot only.

E. Acid Sprayer: The cannon can launch a 20 foot (6.1 m) wide spray of deadly organic acid up to 200 feet (61 m) away. Mantis Cannons armed with this weapon are the ones most often used in the Underground Havens.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: Inflicts 4D8 per melee round to inorganic matter and only 2D4 S.D.C. damage to organic matter. The acid burns for 2D4 melees.

Rate of Fire: 4 attacks per melee.

Maximum Effective Range: 200 feet (61 m).

Payload: 25 spray attacks. The acid continuously regenerates at a rate of one spray every 1D6 minutes.

Bonus: +2 to strike on an aimed shot only.

F. Quill Storm Cannon: The enormous cannon barrel is actually a bundle of fifty smaller gun barrels. Each one of these narrow barrels is capable of firing one razor-sharp quill every second. When all fifty quill launchers fire in rapid succession, the weapon unleashes a nearly continuous stream of deadly spikes. This anti-infantry weapon will quickly mow down everything in its path, but it will also exhaust its payload just as quickly. This is another weapon primarily used within the Underground Havens because stray quills do little structural damage to the humans' homes. Not to mention, the payload is exhausted too quickly to be used effectively in massive engagements.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: 3D4x10 to a 5-foot (1.5 m) area per burst of 100 quills, 5D4x10 to a 10-foot (3 m) area per burst of 200 quills, or 7D4x10 to a 20-foot (6.1 m) area per burst of 400 quills.

Rate of Fire: 4 attacks per melee.

Maximum Effective Range: 1,000 feet (305 m).

Payload: 2,000 quills. 400 quills are replenished every 4 hours.

Bonuses: +2 to strike.

2. Burning Vapor Sprayer: The Mantis has a chemical sprayer mounted on each side of the body and one on its back. When a robot gets too close or sneaks up behind the War Mount, it uses these glands to excrete a powerful corrosive cloud. The cloud stays in the air for 1D4+1 melee rounds before it dissipates.

Primary Purpose: Defense.

Secondary Purpose: Close Combat.

Mega-Damage: Inflicts 3D6 per melee round to inorganic matter for 1D4+1 melee rounds, but the cloud only inflicts 2D6 S.D.C. damage to organic matter.

Rate of Fire: 4 blasts per melee.

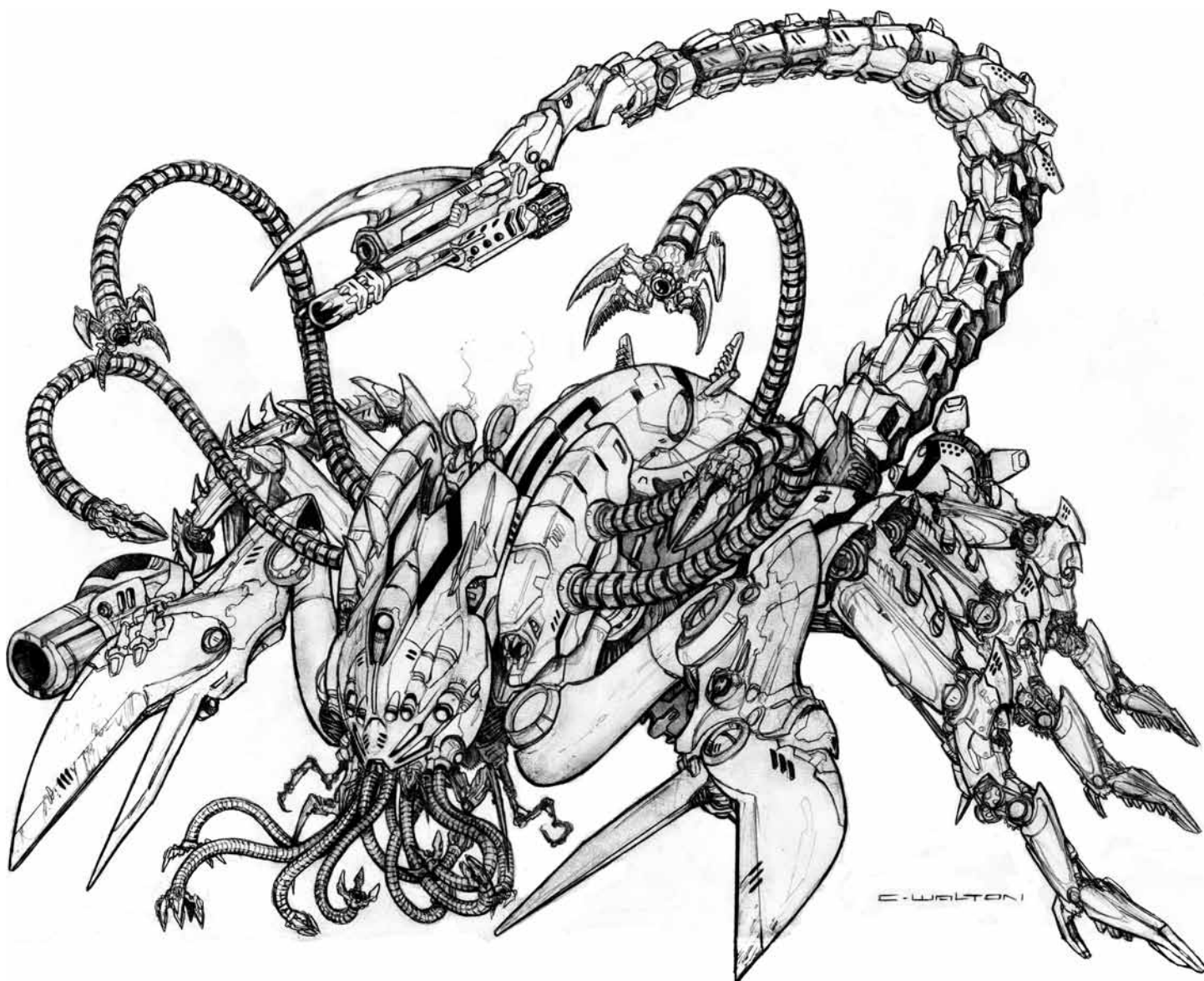
Effective Range: 20 feet (6.1 m).

Payload: 10 blasts per 24 hours.

Robots of Legion Collector

Legion's forces contain a large amount of captured N.E.X.U.S. robots, but one of the few robot designs that she builds from scratch is her favorite minion, the Collector. Legion has a fondness for arachnids, insects and other hive creatures, which is why she designed her own personal transport vessel, the Factory Walker, to look like an enormous centaur ant. However, she decided to model the Collector after the much deadlier arachnid, the scorpion. Legion gave her favorite creation the power to single-handedly tear apart a Battle Track and all the tools and technical programming required to build one. They serve many roles within her horde and they are well-equipped to handle them all. The Collectors are Legion's frontline warriors, mechanics, personal bodyguards, and as their name implies, they are the primary minion responsible for procuring "raw materials" for the Factory Walker. Since Legion's definition of raw materials also includes living beings and fully functional robots, she equipped her Collectors with several non-lethal armaments in addition to their lethal weapon systems.

The enormous, scorpion-like pincer arms look more like giant Vibro-Scissors than animal claws. As combat weapons, they are strong enough to cleave a Steel Trooper in half, but their primary purpose is to cut large armored hulls into easily transportable sections. In continuing with the scorpion theme, Legion equipped the Collector with a long tail that ends in a powerful "stinger" combination of a Vibro-Blade and a long-range laser cannon. Legion did not just add this tail for thematic purposes; it serves an important function. The laser cannon has its own targeting system and camera, which allows the Collector to completely con-



ceal its main body behind cover or underground and still fire this weapon with complete accuracy. It gives the Collector a distinct tactical advantage during scouting or salvage operations when it may need to engage numerically superior forces. Of course, as Legion's influence spreads and her forces grow, the chances of a Collector being outnumbered are becoming far less likely.

What takes away from its scorpion appearance are the four powerful tentacles mounted on the sides of the body and the ten smaller tentacles mounted on its head. Each tentacle ends in a mechanical claw that is strong enough to crush a block of mega-steel but still precise enough to repair delicate circuitry. They are primarily used for maintenance operations and to capture living and robotic prey intact. Each tentacle is capable of delivering a powerful electrical discharge that is specially calibrated to inflict minimal damage while maximizing the disruptive effects on the target's circuitry or nervous system. The four larger tentacles were designed for use against robots and M.D.C. beings, while the smaller ones deliver a weaker discharge that is ideal for stunning unarmored humans and animals. Once the target is stunned, the Collector then cocoons it in super-strong carbon nanotube webbing. Each tentacle can extrude this webbing from the tip, and the Collector will usually use all its tentacles in conjunction to quickly incapacitate its prey.

Legion needs to grow her forces quickly, and in order to accomplish this, her Factory Walker must churn out a continuous supply of robots, cyborgs, and munitions. While this enormous robot is capable of gathering a substantial amount of raw materials on its own, it cannot possibly harvest the sheer amount of captives and battlefield salvage that it requires without the help of its ever-growing force of Collectors. They constantly scour the land around the Factory Walker gathering raw materials and destroying anyone they deem to be too great a threat (in other words, anyone too strong to capture). When viewed from above, Legion and her force of Collectors resemble an ant colony with hundreds (soon to be thousands) of Collectors scurrying back and forth from the Factory Walker with their salvaged prizes in tow. Legion prefers to keep her forces spread fairly thin so that they can scout out a larger area for danger and for new sources of raw materials. The only time when she keeps her minions close is when a significant threat is nearby (like a massive Resistance or N.E.X.U.S. army).

Class: Salvage, Maintenance, and Assault Robot.

M.D.C. by Location:

Legs (6) – 125 each

Pincer Arms (2) – 150 each

Particle Beam Cannons (2) – 100 each

Large Tentacle Arms (4) – 90 each
Small Tentacle Arms (10) – 60 each
Tool Arms (4) – 30 each
Scorpion Tail – 150
Tail-Mounted Laser Cannon – 100
Head – 250
*Main Body – 350
Force Field – 100

*Depleting the M.D.C. of the Main Body will completely destroy the robot.

Speed:

Running: Maximum speed is 100 mph (160 km).

Leaping: 10 feet (3 m) high over across, increase by 50% with a short running start and double when running at full speed. 100 feet (30.5 m) high over across from jet thruster assisted leaps.

Digging: 10 mph (16 km) through sand or dirt. 5 mph (8 km) through clay, rock or stone.

Swimming: Not possible.

Flying: The jet thrusters were designed for short hops, but they can sustain flight. Maximum speed is only 50 mph (80 km).

Maximum Altitude: Limited to about 500 feet (152 m).

Range Limitations: Technically, the thrusters have no limit, but the Collector will rarely fly for more than a few minutes at a time since the slow flight speed and maneuverability leaves it a sitting duck (-2 to dodge while flying).

Statistical Data:

Height: 12 feet (3.7 m).

Width: 15 feet (4.6 m).

Length: 20 feet (6.1 m) for the main body, plus an additional 25 feet (7.6 m) for the scorpion tail.

Weight: 3.5 tons when fully loaded.

Physical Strength: Robotic P.S. of 45.

Cargo: None. Salvage is carried on top of the robot, not inside.

Power System: Standard.

Trade Value: None, except perhaps to a Technojacker.

Horror Factor: 15

Senses and Features: Standard.

Number of Attacks per Melee: 6.

Combat Bonuses (includes bonuses from being controlled by the Legion personality): +5 on initiative, +5 to strike with ranged weapons, +7 to strike in hand to hand combat, +9 to parry, +4 to dodge, +5 to disarm, and +3 to roll with punch.

Penalties: The slow flight speed and poor maneuverability of the jet thrusters leaves the Collector open to attack (-2 to dodge).

Skills of Note: Standard.

Weapon Systems:

1. Particle Beam Cannons (2): Mounted on each pincer claw is a powerful short-range particle beam cannon. They are used to engage enemies that prove too difficult for capture, or anyone that attacks the Factory Walker.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: 1D6x10 M.D. per single blast, 2D6x10 M.D. per dual blast (counts as one melee attack).

Rate of Fire: Each single or dual blast counts as one melee attack.

Effective Range: 1,000 feet (305 m).

Bonuses: +1 to strike.

Payload: Effectively unlimited.

2. Large Collection Tentacles (4): The Collector has over a dozen tentacles mounted along its body and on its head that it uses to capture and transport “raw materials” to the Factory Walker. These tentacles are similar in design to the collection tentacles mounted on the Walker, except they are not retractable. The four larger tentacles mounted along the body are mainly used against robotic targets and heavily armored Splicers. The ten smaller tentacles mounted on the head are generally reserved for unarmored humans and animals, plus they are also used for delicate procedures and repairs. Like the tentacles mounted on the Factory Walker, each one can deliver a powerful electric shock that can stun living prey or scramble the circuits of robotic targets. The voltage and amperage are specially calibrated to inflict minimal damage while maximizing the disruptive effects on the target’s circuitry or nervous system. Each tentacle can also extrude incredibly strong, carbon nanotube webbing that can be used to cocoon particularly worrisome targets.

Primary Purpose: Collecting Raw Materials.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: The electric shock inflicts 1D6 M.D. every melee round that it is applied. As long as the current is running through a robotic target, its circuits will be completely scrambled and it will be unable to move or defend itself in any way. The charge is only strong enough to affect robots weighing 300 pounds (135 kg) or less, but multiple tentacles can combine their attacks to affect larger targets. When used against Splicers and other M.D.C. beings, the Collector generally uses brief jolts of electricity to prevent permanent injury. Victims must make a roll to save vs stun of 15 or higher. On a failed roll, the target is completely paralyzed for one melee round, plus stunned for the next 2D4 melee rounds after that (-3 attacks per melee; -4 to strike, parry, and dodge; and speed is reduced by 40%).

Once the target is stunned, the Collector will generally cocoon the victim in carbon nanotube webbing. The Collector generally employs 4 to 8 tentacles for this attack in order to cocoon the target as quickly as possible. One melee action is required to apply one 20-foot (6.1 m) length of webbing. The cocoon itself has 50 M.D.C., but victims with a robotic P.S. of 35 or higher can spend one melee round to break free of their bonds. The Walker can continue to apply webbing to reinforce the cocoon. Every additional 20 feet (6.1 m) of webbing increases the M.D.C. of the cocoon by 30 M.D.C. and increases the P.S. required to break free by 20.

Rate of Fire: Activating the electric shock counts as one melee attack (it does not require any melee attacks to maintain the shock, but that tentacle cannot be used for anything else). Applying 20 feet (6.1 m) of webbing counts as one melee attack.

Effective Range: The tentacles have a reach of 12 feet (3.7 m), and the nanotube webbing can be applied up to 5 feet (1.5 m) away.

Payload: The payload for the electrical blasts is effectively unlimited. The Collector contains a total of 100 feet (30.5 m) of nanotube webbing. All the tentacles are supplied from this single reserve.

3. Small Collection Tentacles (10): The small collection tentacles are specifically designed for use against unarmored humans and other S.D.C. creatures, but that does not mean they are useless against more powerful opponents. Each tentacle

still possesses impressive strength, and when all ten of these limbs combine their power, they can tear apart nearly any foe.

Primary Purpose: Collecting Raw Materials.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: The electric shock inflicts 2D6 S.D.C. plus the victim must make a roll to save vs stun of 15 or higher. On a failed roll, the target is completely paralyzed for one melee round, plus stunned for the next 2D4 melee rounds after that (-3 attacks per melee; -4 to strike, parry, and dodge; and speed is reduced by 40 percent). The electric shock from these tentacles is not strong enough to stun M.D.C. creatures or robots. Once the target is stunned, the Collector will generally cocoon the victim in carbon nanotube webbing. The Collector generally employs 4 to 8 tentacles for this attack in order to cocoon the target as quickly as possible. One melee action is required to apply one 20-foot (6.1 m) length of webbing. The cocoon itself has 50 M.D.C., but victims with a robotic P.S. of 35 or higher can spend one melee round to break free of their bonds. The Walker can continue to apply webbing to reinforce the cocoon. Every additional 20 feet (6.1 m) of webbing increases the M.D.C. of the cocoon by 30 M.D.C. and increases the P.S. required to break free by 20.

Rate of Fire: Activating the electric shock counts as one melee attack (it does not require any melee attacks to maintain the shock, but that tentacle cannot be used for anything else). Applying 20 feet (6.1 m) of webbing counts as one melee attack.

Effective Range: The tentacles have a reach of 8 feet (2.4 m), and the nanotube webbing can be applied up to 5 feet (1.5 m) away.

Payload: Electrical blasts are effectively unlimited. The Collector contains a total of 100 feet (30.5 m) of nanotube webbing. All the tentacles are supplied from this single reserve.

4. Tail-Mounted Long-Range Laser Cannon: On the end of the scorpion tail is a powerful, long-range laser cannon. It possesses its own targeting system and camera, which allows the Collector to conceal its main body behind cover and still fire this weapon with perfect accuracy.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: 6D6 M.D. per blast.

Rate of Fire: Each blast counts as one melee attack.

Effective Range: 4,000 feet (1,219 m).

Bonuses: +3 to strike.

Payload: Effectively unlimited.

5. Utility Arms (4): The four small arms mounted on the sides of the head are all-purpose utility arms. Each one contains a fusion torch, laser scalpel, and three small, extendable pincers that are used for manipulating microscopic circuits.

Primary Purpose: Repairs.

Secondary Purpose: Salvage.

Mega-Damage: 4D6 S.D.C., 1D6x10 S.D.C., 1D4 M.D., 1D6 M.D., 2D6 M.D., or 4D6 M.D. for the Fusion Torch. 1D6 M.D., 2D6 M.D., or 3D6 M.D. for the Laser Scalpel.

Rate of Fire: Each blast counts as one melee attack.

Effective Range: 50 feet (15.2 m) for the Laser Scalpel and 2 feet (0.6 m) for the Fusion Torch.

Payload: Effectively unlimited.

6. Pincer Claws (2): The pincers of the Collector look more like enormous scissors rather than animal claws. They are primarily used to cut large salvaged objects into transportable pieces, but they also make devastating close combat weapons. These

massive Vibro-Blades can cut through an armored hull like paper.

Primary Purpose: Salvage.

Secondary Purpose: Assault.

Mega-Damage: 5D6 M.D. for a slice or stab attack or 1D6x10 M.D. for a scissor attack. Both pincers can engage the same target, but it counts as two melee attacks.

Effective Range: 8 feet long (2.4 m).

7. Hand to Hand Combat: Rather than use long-range weapons, the Collector can engage in hand to hand combat using its tentacles, legs, tail, and pincer arms.

Restrained Large Tentacle Strike: 1D4 M.D.

Large Tentacle Strike: 3D6 M.D.

Power Strike with Large Tentacle: 6D6 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Crush Attack using Large Tentacles: 4D6 M.D., but must first entangle the target.

Tear Attack using Large Tentacles: 3D6 M.D.

Power Tear Attack using Multiple Large Tentacles: 1D4x10+20 M.D., but counts as three attacks.

Restrained Small Tentacle Strike: 5D6 S.D.C.

Small Tentacle Strike: 2D6 M.D.

Power Strike with Small Tentacle: 4D6 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Crush Attack using Small Tentacles: 3D6 M.D., but must first entangle the target.

Tear Attack using Small Tentacles: 2D6 M.D.

Power Tear Attack using Multiple Small Tentacles: 2D4x10+20 M.D., but counts as four attacks.

Kick: 2D6 M.D.

Tail Whip: 3D6 M.D.

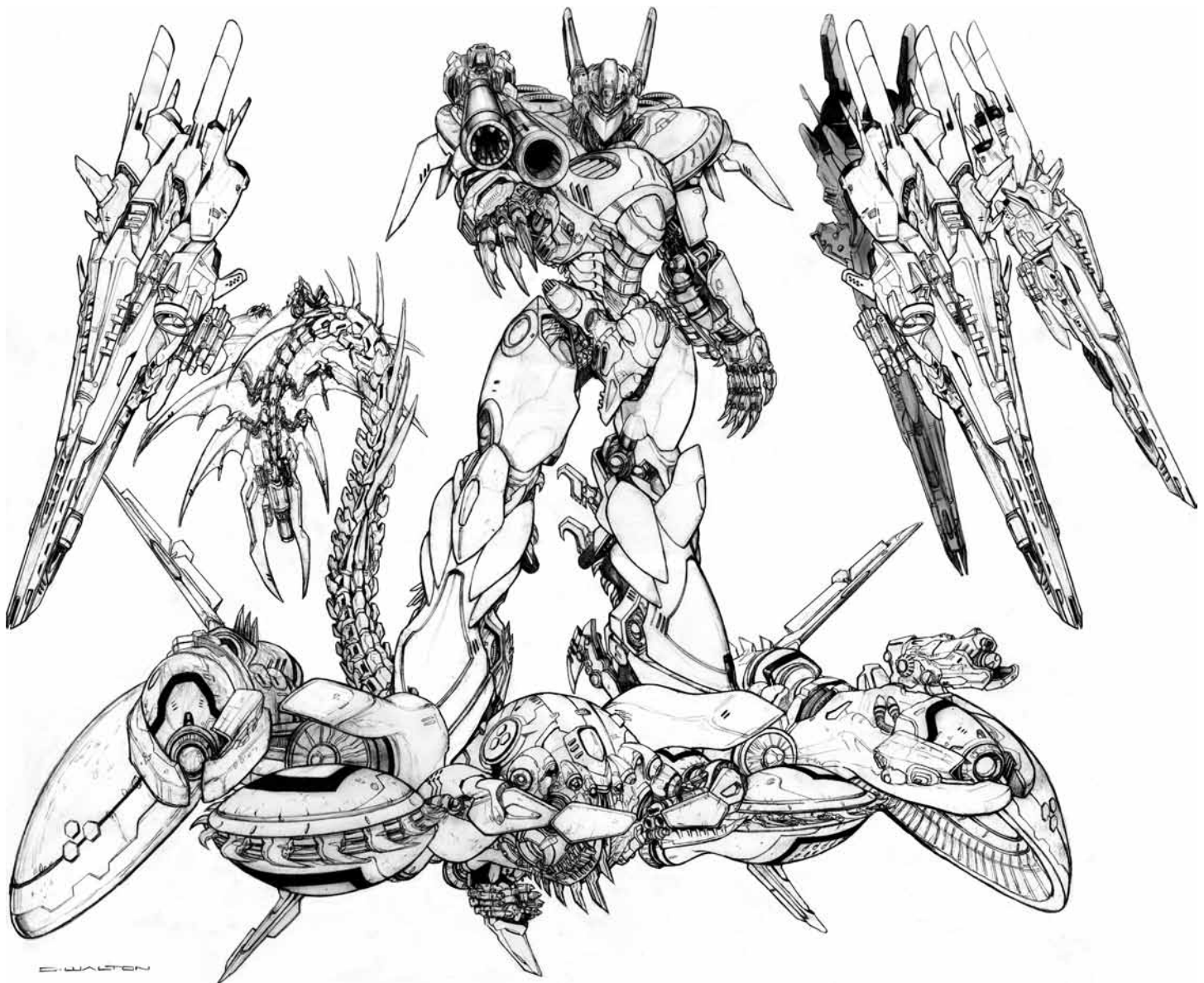
Stab with Tail Blade: 5D6 M.D.

Body Block/Ram: 4D6 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Legionnaire

When Legion first appeared, Great Houses in her Area of Influence sent teams of scouts to learn about this new threat. Most of these agents concluded that the Factory Walker was effectively the General of Legion's Army, the Legionnaires were the Captains, and the rest were basically the foot soldiers. It seemed like a fairly obvious conclusion since the Factory Walker was always at the center of this massive force and the Legionnaires were the ones marshaling Legion's forces across the battlefield. Of course, their conclusions were colored by a very conventional view of warfare and Legion's mind is far from conventional. Legion does not see her forces as an army, but rather she views every robot and cyborg within her army as a single cell of one massive cybernetic organism. From Legion's perspective, her Factory Walker is the brain and her Legionnaires are the nervous system that delivers her will to every corner of her body.

Every one of her creations is capable of relaying her consciousness to nearby allies, but the Legionnaires were designed to transmit this signal over a much greater distance. Legion relies on these heavy combat cyborgs to strategically position her forces about the battlefield. Their importance is obvious to any observer, but the few that have discovered their true purpose have also discovered Legion's greatest weakness. Destroying even one of these Legionnaires is often all it takes to cut Legion off from



a large number of minions, which causes them all to deactivate immediately. Unlike other N.E.X.U.S. creations, Legion did not give her robots their own artificial intelligence programming. They either respond to her direct commands or they go dormant. If another minion comes into range, this link can easily be re-established, but until this can be done, opponents have a tremendous opportunity to cripple or destroy dozens, even hundreds, of incapacitated robots. Destroying the Legionnaires is an excellent way to quickly disable any attack force that has strayed too far from the Factory Walker.

Unfortunately, destroying a Legionnaire is no easy feat. Their ability to absorb damage is almost as impressive as their ability to dish it out. When Legion was first looking through the vast databanks of N.E.X.U.S. for possible Legionnaire designs, she stumbled across something interesting. She discovered generations ago, that humans actually augmented their own bodies with Machine technology. Some changes were minor like replacing a lost limb with a realistic prosthetic or replacing an eye with some kind of advanced implant, but she also discovered designs for full conversion cyborgs. Legion was impressed by the sheer power of these creations. These cyborg frames were as strong or stronger than any of the robots that N.E.X.U.S. uses today, but

they were also wrapped in an additional layer of heavy armor that made them walking tanks. She took one of her favorite cyborg discoveries and modified it slightly to create the Legionnaire. Instead of making the armor removable, she integrated it into the cyborg frame. She then armed this powerful chassis with a guided mortar launcher on its back, a heavy double-barreled particle beam cannon on its right arm, and an experimental new, high-tech chainsaw on its left arm she calls a banshee blade. These weapons make the Legionnaire a match for most opponents, but it is the series of companion drones she linked to her creation that makes it so deadly.

Legion did not just look to the past when designing her combat cyborgs. She watched the Resistance intently to see how such a numerically inferior force could put up such a fight. She liked how certain Splicers like the Packmasters, Bombardiers, and Swarm Lords may have been single warriors, but their strength came from how they acted in perfect unison with the creatures they commanded. Legion loves the concept of unity and wanted to replicate this same strength in her Legionnaires. Since these heavy cyborgs cannot fly under their own power, she equipped each one with a robotic wing board. This is more than just a vehicle. The wing board is a heavily armed combat drone that not

only gives the Legionnaire tremendous firepower when the two are connected, but it can also go off on its own to track down and attack targets. Additionally, the four-pronged backpack on the Legionnaire that looks like a jetpack or some kind of ornate metallic cape can actually break apart into four separate gun drones. The wing board and gun drones are all directed by the Legionnaire, and since Legion is the one that ultimately commands them all, directing all these drones does not distract the Legionnaire or divide its focus in any way. Each gun drone is equipped with a powerful laser cannon and mini-missiles that it can use to engage enemies directly, or it can “lase” targets so they can be bombarded by the Legionnaire’s guided mortars. This allows the Legionnaire to soar up into the skies on its wing board, and then send in a gun drone to paint targets so they can be safely bombarded from miles away. These drones can also be used to further expand Legion’s signal to other robots, but the Legionnaire is still the key. Destroying the cyborg causes all the drones and any other minions within a 10-mile (16 km) radius to go dormant.

Class: Heavy Combat Cyborg.

M.D.C. by Location:

Legs (2) – 225 each
Arms (2) – 175 each
Feet (2) – 200 each
Hands (2) – 100 each
Particle Beam Cannon (1) – 180
Mortar Launcher – 250
*Head – 200
**Main Body – 720
Force Field – 100

* Depleting the M.D.C. of the head will kill the cyborg instantly.

** Depleting the M.D.C. of the main body will destroy the artificial body, but emergency systems will keep the organic components alive for 36 hours. Legion considers the recovery of these components a high priority and will send swarms of Collectors to rescue them and return them to the Factory Walker. However, inflicting massive amounts of damage (125 points below zero) will completely destroy the cyborg with no hope of recovery.

Speed:

Running: Maximum speed is 70 mph (112 km).

Leaping: 20 feet (6.1 m) high or across, increase by 50% with a short running start and double when running at full speed.

Digging: 10 mph (16 km) through sand or dirt, but half as fast through clay, rock or stone. It takes 2D4 melee rounds for it to dig down deep enough to conceal itself.

Swimming: Not possible.

Flying: None on its own. When riding its wing board, the Legionnaire can fly at a maximum speed of 350 mph (560 km), but cruising speed is considered to be 75-100 mph (120 to 160 km).

Maximum Altitude: Limited to about 2,000 feet (610 m).

Range Limitations: Standard. Needs to rest the wing board every 120 hours to avoid overheating.

Statistical Data:

Height: 10 feet (3 m).

Width: 4.5 feet (1.4 m).

Length: 4 feet (1.2 m).

Weight: 1.2 tons.

Physical Strength: Robotic P.S. of 45.

Cargo: None.

Power System: Standard.

Trade Value: None, except perhaps to a Technojacker.

Horror Factor: 15.

Senses and Features: Standard.

Number of Attacks per Melee (includes bonuses from being controlled by the Legion personality): 9 for the Legionnaire on its own. When the ‘Borg, Gun Drones, and Wing Board are all operating in unison, the Legionnaire has a total of 25 attacks per melee round.

Combat Bonuses (includes bonuses from being controlled by the Legion personality): +8 on initiative, +6 to strike with ranged weapons, +5 to strike in hand to hand combat, +6 to parry, +6 to dodge, and +3 to roll with punch.

Penalties: The heavy armor limits the ‘Borg’s maximum speed and mobility and makes prowling impossible. These penalties have already been factored into the Legionnaire’s speed and bonuses to strike, parry, dodge, and roll with impact.

Skills of Note: Standard

Weapon Systems:

1. Double-Barreled Particle Beam Cannon: Mounted on the right arm is a powerful, short-range particle beam cannon. The Legionnaire relies on this weapon when operating on its own, but it prefers to use the wing board’s mounted armaments and its pack of gun drones.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: 1D6x10 M.D. per single blast, 2D6x10 M.D. per dual blast (counts as one melee attack).

Rate of Fire: Each single or dual blast counts as one melee attack.

Effective Range: 1,000 feet (305 m).

Bonuses: +1 to strike.

Payload: Effectively unlimited.

2. Banshee Blade: Mounted on the left forearm of the Legionnaire is an experimental new, high-tech chainsaw that Legion calls a Banshee Blade. Instead of using a conventional motor to accelerate the bladed chain, it uses the same electromagnetic mechanism found in rail guns to spin the blade at hypersonic speeds. It inflicts tremendous damage, but it releases a loud, high-pitched whine when activated so it is not an ideal weapon when stealth is required.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: 1D4x10+10 M.D. per attack.

3. Laser-Guided Mortar Launcher: Mounted on the back of the Legionnaire is a four-barreled mortar launcher that is capable of firing off salvos of special explosive rounds. These can be fired off as “dumb” projectiles or the Legionnaire can use its gun drones to mark targets with a special tracking laser. The mortar rounds can then home in on the painted target from up to two miles away. Each launcher fires in succession and then quickly reloads, which allows the Legionnaire to fire off pretty sizeable barrages.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: 4D6 M.D. with a blast radius of 10 feet (3 m).

Rate of Fire: The launcher can fire off volleys of 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, or 24.

Effective Range: 2 miles (3.2 km).

Bonuses: +1 to strike when fired normally, +5 to strike when locked onto a lased target.

Payload: 36 mortar rounds.

4. Hand to Hand Combat: Rather than use long-range weapons, the Legionnaire can engage in hand to hand combat.

Restrained Punch: 1D6 M.D.

Punch: 3D6 M.D.

Power Punch: 8D6 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Vibro-Claw Strike: 4D6 M.D.

Kick: 5D6 M.D.

Leap Kick: 8D6 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Body Block/Ram: 4D6 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Wing Board:

The stingray-like wing board is one of Legion's own designs. She originally designed it to be a lone hunter/killer, but she thought it was so versatile up close and at range that she wanted to tie it to one of her favorite creations, the Legionnaire. It is not the fastest flyer on the planet, but it is capable of making extremely quick cuts and course corrections which makes it incredibly maneuverable and tough to deal with in combat. For ranged attacks, the wing board is equipped with two long-range laser cannons and a decent sized complement of mini-missiles in three concealed launchers that the Legionnaire can use to soften targets from afar before swooping down into close range. The wing board is lined with Banshee Blades that can inflict tremendous damage during high-speed strafes or rams or it can slash or impale targets with the enormous Vibro-Blades on its tail. These articulated blades can slice together like scissors, but more often they are used to impale a victim while closed and then pop open inside the target to lock him in place. Once secured, the Legionnaire can drag the poor victim along the ground or into objects, or simply soar up into the sky and then release him thousands of feet in the air. Legionnaires are incredibly powerful long-range combatants, and they do not even need to engage in close quarters combat to devastate their foes. The fact that Legion uses these types of brutal tactics really demonstrates her sadistic side.

M.D.C. by Location: Laser Cannons (2): 80, Tail: 100, Main Body: 350.

Statistical Data: Height: 4 feet (1.2 m), Width: 12 feet (3.6 m) wide, Length: 8 feet (2.4 m) long with a 12 foot tail (3.6 m). Weight: 1,200 pounds (540 kg), Cargo: None other than the Legionnaire but can carry up to two Legionnaires (2.4 tons).

Speed: Running, Leaping & Digging: Not possible, Swimming: Thrusters allow 40 mph (64 km/34 knots). Depth Tolerance: 1,000 feet (305 m). Flying: Maximum speed of 350 mph (560 km), but cruising speed is considered to be 80-100 mph (128 km to 160 km). Maximum Altitude: 2,000 feet (610 m).

Attacks per Melee: 4 attacks for the wing board. When linked to the Legionnaire, add the attacks per melee round for the cyborg and the wing board together (13 total).

Bonuses: +6 on initiative, +4 to strike, +3 to parry, +6 to automatic dodge, and +4 to pull punch. When linked to the Legionnaire, these bonuses are added to the bonuses of the Legionnaire.

Weapon Systems:

1. Laser Cannons (2): Mega-Damage: 6D6 M.D. per single blast, 12D6 M.D. per dual blast. Range: 5,000 feet (1,524 m). Rate of Fire: Each single blast or dual blast counts as one attack

per melee round. Payload: Effectively unlimited. Bonuses: +3 to strike.

2. Mini-Missile Launchers (3): Mega-Damage: 1D6x10 M.D. with a 15 foot (4.6 m) blast radius for plasma, 5D6 M.D. with a 20 foot (6.1 m) blast radius for fragmentation. Range: One mile (1.6 km). Rate of Fire: Volleys of 1, 2, 4, 8, or 16. Payload: 8 mini-missiles per launcher (24 total), typically carries a complement of 16 plasma mini-missiles and 8 fragmentation mini-missiles.

3. Banshee Blades (3): One blade is mounted on each of the front corners and one is mounted on the belly. Typically, only one can hit a target during a strafing run, but two generally hit during a ram. If the target is run over during a ram, then the third blade will often hit as well. Mega-Damage: 1D6x10 M.D. from a strafe attack, 1D8x10+20 M.D. from a ram plus there is a 01-60% likelihood of knocking an opponent as large as 20 feet (6.1 m) tall off of his feet and onto his back. If knocked off his feet, the victim loses initiative and two melee attacks plus the belly-mounted blade inflicts an additional 1D6x10 M.D. A ram counts as two attacks.

4. Tail-Mounted Vibro-Blades: Mega-Damage: 5D6 M.D. from a slash, 1D6x10 M.D. from a scissor strike. In order to impale a target and then lock him in place by opening the scissors, the Legionnaire must first announce its intention to do so and then roll a natural 18, 19, or 20. The initial strike inflicts 1D4x10 M.D., but the Legionnaire now has the opportunity to inflict much more damage. Dragging the victim along the ground inflicts an additional 3D8 M.D. per melee round. Slamming the victim into objects at high speed inflicts 4D10+24 M.D. per collision but counts as three attacks per melee round. Releasing the victim high up in the air inflicts 1D8 M.D. for every 100 feet (30.5 m) of the fall.

Gun Drones (4):

The strange looking jet pack on the back of the Legionnaire is actually four separate robot drones that can break off and hunt down prey on their own. This makes the Legionnaire an incredibly versatile combatant. Each Gun Drone can circle around to flank the target and attack with its mounted weapons or paint the opponent with a special targeting laser so it can be bombarded by the Legionnaire's guided mortars. Each Gun Drone can only travel a maximum of one mile (1.6 km) away from the Legionnaire.

M.D.C.: Main Body: 150.

Size: 7 feet (2.1 m) long, 240 pounds (108 kg).

Speed: Maximum speed of 200 mph (320 km), but cruising speed is considered to be 50-80 mph (80 km to 128 km). Maximum altitude is only 3,000 feet (914 m).

Attacks per Melee: 3 attacks for each Gun Drone.

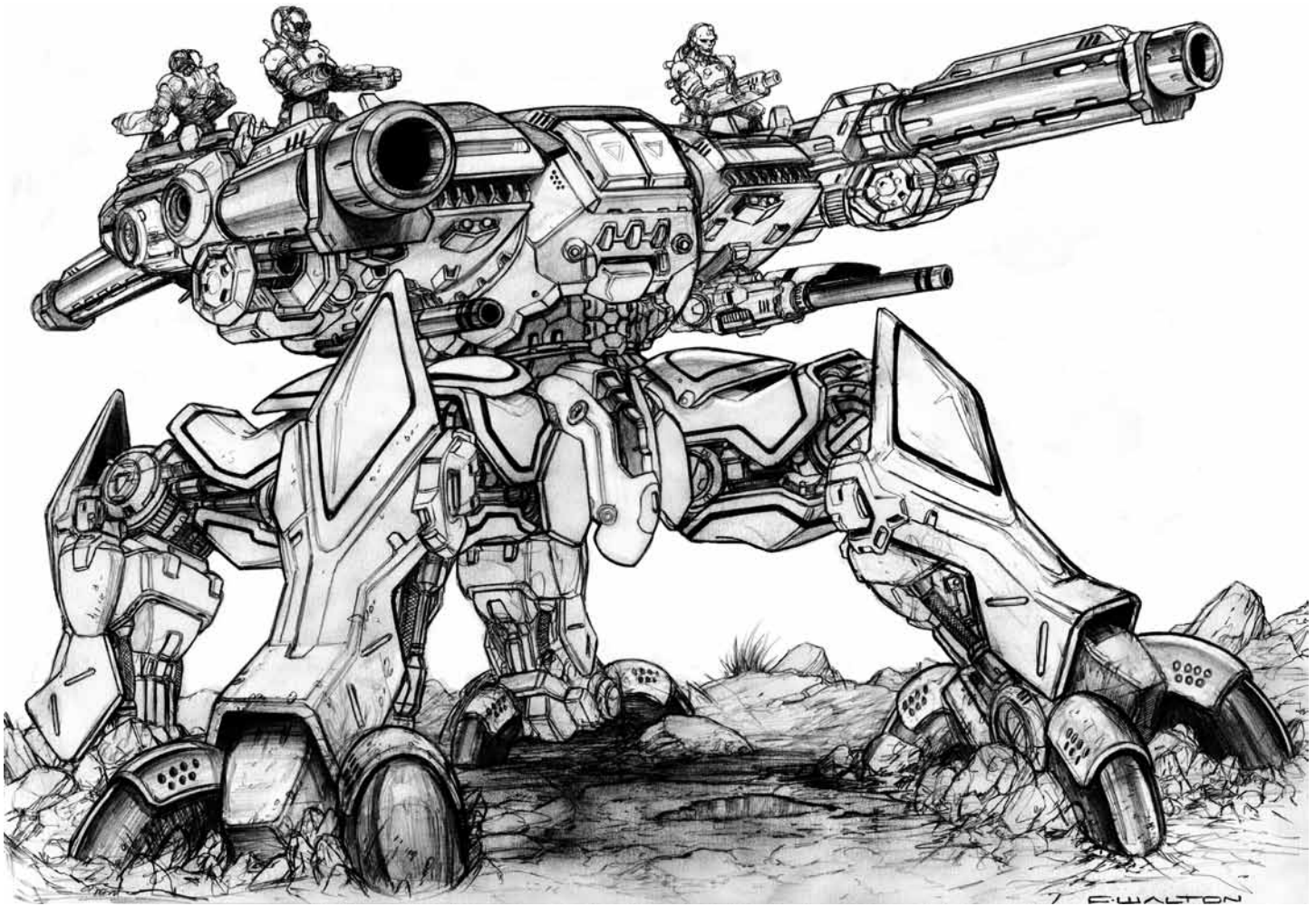
Bonuses: +2 on initiative, +3 to strike, and +5 to dodge. These bonuses only apply to the Gun Drone, they are not added to the Legionnaire whether the drones are linked or not.

Weapon Systems:

1. Laser Cannons: Mega-Damage: 4D6 M.D. per single blast. Range: 3,000 feet (914 m). Rate of Fire: Each single blast counts as one attack per melee round. Payload: Effectively unlimited. Bonuses: +3 to strike.

2. Targeting Laser: While it inflicts no damage, it can be used to track and mark a target for bombardment from up to 5000 feet (1,524 m) away.

3. Mini-Missile Launchers (2): Mega-Damage: 1D6x10 M.D. with a 15 foot (4.6 m) blast radius. Range: About a mile (1.6 km). Rate of Fire: volleys of 1, 2, 4, or 8. Payload: 4 mini-missiles per launcher (8 total).



Fusion ‘Borg

The Fusion ‘Borg serves as an excellent reminder of just how horrifying Legion’s vision of unity truly is. She may speak of bringing humans and Machines together into perfect harmony, but ultimately, she sees them both as little more than spare parts to be used and fused together in whatever way she sees fit. This belief is exemplified in the Fusion ‘Borg. This “borg” is really just a heavy assault robot that Legion merged with three unfortunate human victims. Each person was cut in half and their torsos were mounted to the top of the ‘Borg to serve as the targeting computers for each of the main laser cannons. The cannons are linked to each Gunner’s visor, so the cannon follows wherever the Gunner looks. The forearms of each Gunner were also removed and replaced with a plasma cannon and an ion cannon. This enables the Gunners to engage targets that have crossed outside of their cannon’s field of fire, plus they can defend the Fusion ‘Borg from any hostiles that attempt to climb on its back.

It is an effective design, but Legion could have achieved this effect just as easily without butchering humans. Most people suspect she took this ghastly approach for a reason. Perhaps it was done to announce to the world what her vision of unity truly meant. Perhaps it was just the easiest route. Whatever the motiva-

tion, she did succeed in instilling a sense of terror and anger into her human adversaries. Splicers absolutely hate Fusion ‘Borgs and will try to take them down whenever possible in order to free the tortured souls merged to the hull. Unfortunately, their good intentions often get them into trouble. Fusion ‘Borgs are incredibly powerful opponents, and many strike teams that have tried to take one down have learned the hard way what a difficult proposition that can be.

Fusion ‘Borgs were built for heavy assault. They are sometimes sent out on their own to dispatch small squads or isolated targets, but they are typically attached to larger assault forces. Their job is to take down the heaviest hitters like Battle Tracks, Assault Slay-ers, and War Mounts, and then mop up the foot soldiers once these threats have been cleared. Similar to some of Legion’s other cyborg creations, the Fusion ‘Borg was fitted with an advanced antenna so that it can travel farther away from the main army without losing connection with Legion’s signal. It can travel up to 10 miles (16 km) away from another Legion minion, but it can only broadcast the signal the standard 500 feet (152.4 m).

Class: Heavy Assault Cyborg.

M.D.C. by Location:

Legs (4) – 350 each

Feet (4) – 240 each

High-Powered Laser Cannons (3) – 360 each
Forward Mounted Rail Guns (2) – 250 each
Mini-Missile Launchers (2) – 200 each
Gunners (3) – 180 each
*Main Body – 810
Force Field – 200

* Depleting the M.D.C. of the main body will destroy the artificial body, but emergency systems will keep the organic components (the Gunners) alive for 36 hours. Legion considers the recovery of these components a high priority and will send swarms of Collectors to rescue them and return them to the Factory Walker. However, inflicting massive amounts of damage to the main body (250 points below zero) will completely destroy all the Gunners with no hope of recovery, or the Gunners can be finished off directly.

Speed:

Running: Maximum speed is 120 mph (192 km).

Leaping: 20 feet (6.1 m) high or across, increase by 50% with a short running start and double when running at full speed.

Digging: Not possible.

Swimming: Not possible.

Flying: Not possible.

Statistical Data:

Height: 22 feet (6.7 m).

Width: 19 feet (5.7 m).

Length: 18 feet (5.4 m).

Weight: 15 tons.

Physical Strength: Robotic P.S. of 50.

Cargo: None.

Power System: Standard.

Trade Value: None, except perhaps to a Technojacker.

Horror Factor: 16.

Senses and Features: Standard.

Number of Attacks per Melee (includes bonuses from being controlled by the Legion personality): 15 total, (6 for the Fusion 'Borg and 3 for each of the Gunners).

Combat Bonuses (includes bonuses from being controlled by the Legion personality): +9 on initiative, +8 to strike with ranged weapons, +3 to strike in hand to hand combat, +3 to parry, +6 to dodge, +3 to roll with punch, and +4 to pull punch.

Skills of Note: Standard.

Weapon Systems:

1. High-Powered Laser Cannons (3): On the sides and rear of the main body are three high-powered laser cannons. Each laser cannon is controlled by a cybernetic Gunner that is mounted to the robotic frame directly above it. The Gunners basically act as the independent targeting computers for each cannon. Wherever the Gunner looks, the cannon follows. Each cannon has a 200-degree firing arc; so all three guns provide a complete field of fire around the entire Fusion 'Borg.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: 2D4x10 M.D. per blast. Multiple cannons can engage the same target, but each must roll to strike individually.

Rate of Fire: Each Gunner has 3 attacks per melee round, and each blast counts as one of the Gunner's attacks.

Effective Range: 6,000 feet (1,828 m).

Bonuses: +3 to strike.

Payload: Effectively unlimited.

2. Forward-Mounted Rail Guns (2): A pair of forward-facing rail guns are mounted to the underbelly of the 'Borg. These are controlled directly by the Fusion 'Borg.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: 2D6x10 M.D. per single 50 round burst. 4D6x10 M.D. for a dual burst.

Rate of Fire: Each single or dual burst counts as one of the Fusion 'Borg's melee attacks.

Effective Range: 3000 feet (914 m).

Bonuses: +2 to strike.

Payload: 5,000 rounds total (100 bursts total).

3. Mini-Missile Launchers (2): Mounted on the front of the 'Borg are two concealed mini-missile launchers. These are also controlled directly by the Fusion 'Borg.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: Any mini-missile can be used, but standard issue is plasma 1D6x10 M.D. with a blast radius of 15 feet (4.6 m).

Rate of Fire: The launchers can fire off volleys of 1, 2, 4, 8, or 12. Each volley counts as one of the Fusion 'Borg's melee attacks.

Effective Range: 1 mile (1.6 km).

Payload: 48 total, 24 per launcher.

4. Gunners (3): The most horrific components of the Fusion 'Borg are the three humans that have been cut in half and turned into living targeting computers. Each of the main laser cannons is linked to the visor of a Gunner. Wherever the Gunner looks, the cannon follows. In addition, the forearms of the Gunners were hacked off and replaced with an ion cannon and a plasma cannon. This lets the Gunners engage targets outside of the main laser cannon's normal firing arc, and they can be used to repel enemies that attempt to crawl onto the back of the 'Borg.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: 5D6 M.D. for the ion cannon, 1D4x10 M.D. per the plasma cannon. Both weapons can be fired at the same target, which inflicts 1D6x10+10 M.D.

Rate of Fire: Each Gunner has 3 attacks per melee round, and each single or dual blast counts as one of the Gunner's attacks.

Effective Range: 2000 feet (610 m) for the ion cannon, 1000 feet (305 m) for the plasma cannon.

Bonuses: +1 to strike when using their forearm mounted weapons, +3 to strike when using the main laser cannon.

Payload: Effectively unlimited.

5. Hand to Hand Combat: Rather than use long-range weapons, the Fusion 'Borg can engage in hand to hand combat.

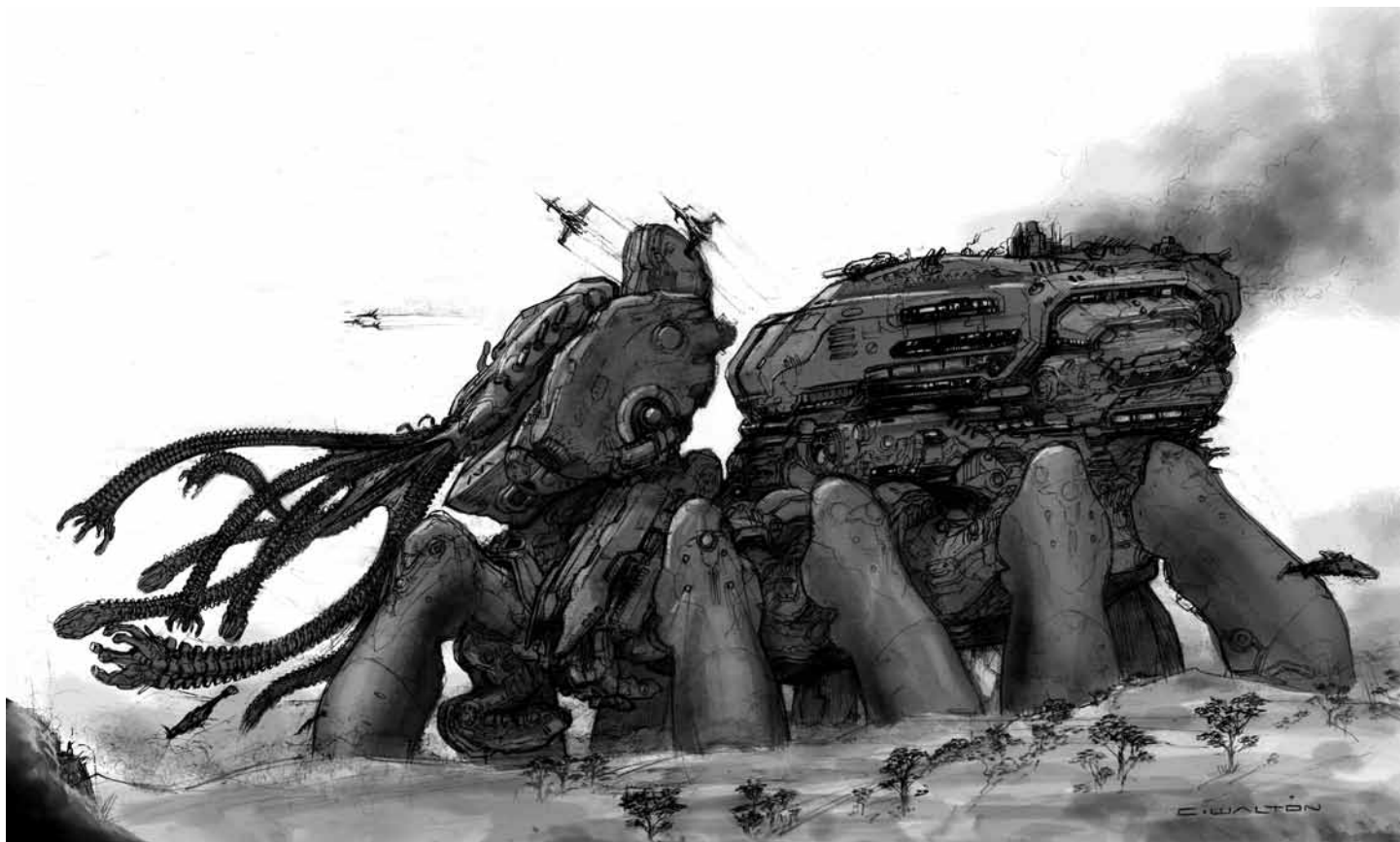
Restrained Kick: 2D4 M.D.

Kick: 1D4x10+10 M.D.

Leap Kick: 2D4x10 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Stomp: 4D6 M.D., but the stomp is only effective against objects 12 feet (3.6 m) or smaller.

Body Block/Ram: 5D8 M.D. and has a 01-75% likelihood of knocking an opponent as large as 30 feet (9 m) tall off of his feet and onto his back. If knocked off his feet, the victim loses initiative and two melee attacks. A ram counts as two attacks.



Factory Walker

(Game Master Note: The Factory Walker is only making a visual appearance within this episode and is not meant to be engaged in a combative encounter, as it would be pure suicide. We have decided to reveal just the write-up and visual descriptive stats for the Factory Walker. A complete description and combative stats will appear in a later episode!)

The Factory Walker

The Factory Walker is the single largest robot on the planet. Legion designed this enormous war machine to house her consciousness and act as the brains of her ever-expanding body (her vast army of minions). It is more than just a war machine; it is the key to her plans for conquest. This enormous spider-like juggernaut not only possesses twice the destructive power of a Land Dominator, but it also contains four state of the art manufacturing bays and a fully equipped medical center. The Factory Walker can convert raw materials, battlefield salvage, and living captives into combat-ready robots, cyborgs, Necroborgs, weapons, munitions, spare parts, and even swarms of nanobots at amazing speeds. It enables her forces to remain completely self-sufficient (and continuously growing) even without access to the Machine's Industrial Centers.

The Walker contains the schematics to every N.E.X.U.S. robot design. Each bay is large enough to build an Assault Slayer, and these ingeniously designed manufacturing centers can produce even the most complex automaton ten times faster than any Machine installation. Of course, Legion still finds it much more expedient and efficient to simply capture and reprogram existing robots rather than build new ones. She rarely constructs

N.E.X.U.S. designed robots and prefers to churn out her own personal designs. Unless the Walker's resources are needed elsewhere, Legion will generally dedicate at least two bays to producing a steady string of human and animal cyborgs or her favorite robot minions known as Collectors.

The Factory Walker may possess impressive offensive capabilities, but Legion chose its armaments more for their defensive applications. She knew from the moment the Walker took its first step, it would be under almost continuous assault by the Machine and the Resistance. Legion focused on area effect weapons like mini-missiles and Gatling guns since they are not only perfect for engaging large concentrations of enemies, but they are also great for shooting down incoming missiles and fast-moving enemy aircraft. In fact, the enormous mini-missile launchers mounted on the Walker's back are capable of throwing up such a tremendous volley of missiles that it is nearly impossible for anything to get through. This type of strategy is usually costly in terms of munitions, but the Factory Walker can replace spent rockets so quickly that this is rarely an issue. Its primary offensive weapons consist of a pair of powerful particle beam cannons mounted on the forward weapon arms. These stubby-barreled cannons may not have quite the range and power of the Land Dominator's main weapon, but each is still capable of liquidating a Battle Track in a few shots. Legion was willing to trade away the power of more massive cannons in favor of an increased field of fire. She never wanted to be deprived of her most powerful armaments if the enemy ever got too close (which was the main weakness she saw in the Land Dominator).

In addition to lethal armaments, the Walker also contains several non-lethal weapon systems that it uses to collect subjects (both living and robotic) so they can be converted into Legion controlled minions. There are four gas vents mounted along the

sides of the Walker that allow it to blanket a 500-foot (152.4 m) radius with various types of toxic chemicals. Legion commonly uses knock-out gas or paralyzing compounds, but she will switch to Creeping Death nerve gas when she needs to flush out hidden opponents (or just to make a statement). Mounted around the “mouth” of the Walker are six retractable tentacles that can deliver a powerful electric shock to any target they ensnare. A quick shock can stun or disable any living target, but they can also disable robotic targets by delivering a continuous electrical discharge. The electrical current temporarily scrambles the robot’s circuits while only inflicting minimal damage. The Walker then reels its disabled prey in towards the mouth where a battery of surgical lasers is used to “lobotomize” the robot so that it can be safely brought inside for reprogramming. Legion can also encase targets in super-strong carbon nanotube webbing. She generally does this as an extra precaution when she captures prototype robot designs that she is unfamiliar with or for times when her instincts warn her that a particular victim may be part of a trap.

Legion has designed one of the most sophisticated pieces of technology on the planet. Before exiting N.E.X.U.S., she stole hundreds of the most advanced designs she could find from the Machine’s vast databanks, plus she invented some impressive new designs to serve her unique needs. Even Hecate marvels at many of the innovative features that Legion incorporated into her personal transport vessel. The Machine knows that destroying the Factory Walker is the key to stopping Legion, but several of the personalities are hoping to find a way to delete the Legion persona without damaging the Walker. Some wish to reverse-engineer this amazing piece of technology to unlock its secrets, while others hope to follow in the footsteps of Legion and use it to unleash their own personal plans for global domination. Sometimes it is unclear if Legion’s successes are a result of her tactical genius or just the Machine’s divided mind sabotaging itself.

Class: Mobile Industrial Center and Heavy Assault Robot.

M.D.C. by Location:

Arms (2) – 500 each
Legs (6) – 1,500 each
Particle Beam Cannons (2) – 500 each
Frag Gatling Guns (4) – 250 each
Mini-Missile Launchers (8) – 300 each
Point Defense Lasers (10) – 75 each
Surgical Lasers (4) – 50 each
Collection Tentacles (6) – 350 each
Processing Bay Door – 900
Manufacturing Bay Door – 1,300
*Main Body – 4,300
Force Field – 2,000

* Depleting the M.D.C. of the Main Body will completely destroy the robot.

Speed:

Running: Maximum speed is 60 mph (96 km), but normal cruising speed is 45 mph (72 km).

Digging: Not possible.

Leaping: Not Possible.

Swimming: Not possible.

Flying: Not possible.

Statistical Data:

Height: 90 feet (27 m) tall when standing at full height.

Width: 80 feet (24 m).

Length: 230 feet (70 m).

Weight: 400 tons.

Physical Strength: Robotic P.S. of 70.

Cargo: Can carry up to 150 additional tons, but typically only holds 80 tons.

Power System: Possesses multiple fusion cells that allow it to continuously run at peak efficiency for up to 100 years.

Trade Value: None.

Horror Factor: 19.

Senses and Features: Standard, plus the following:

- **Manufacturing Bays (4):** The “abdomen” section of the spider-like body is divided into four separate Manufacturing Bays. Each bay is large enough to construct an Assault Slayer, or it can build several smaller robots simultaneously. One bay is constantly dedicated to processing raw materials and salvaged metal into useful components, although other bays can be quickly converted to this purpose whenever necessary. All these bays are a continuous buzz of activity, with dozens of mechanical armatures and millions of nanobots working in conjunction to churn out robotic minions at blazing speeds. The Factory Walker can produce any N.E.X.U.S. designed robot 10 times faster than the most advanced Industrial Center, but it is still much faster for Legion to simply capture and reprogram existing robots. Completed robots, cyborgs, and supplies are released through a heavily armored door on the underside of the abdomen.
- **Medical Bay:** A smaller medical center is located near the Manufacturing Bays. Its sole purpose is to process humans and animals for cybernetic conversion. This high-tech facility can process ten humans (or similarly sized animals) simultaneously. Only living cyborgs are created in the Medical Bay; Necroborgs and Necrobots are built in the Manufacturing Bays from bodies salvaged from the battlefields.
- **Processing Bay:** The front of the Walker contains a large access door that serves as the “mouth” of the robot. All raw materials (robots, humans, animals, scrap metal, and raw ore) are processed and sorted within this portal and then passed on to the Manufacturing Bays. Bringing living beings and functioning robots into the Walker is a dangerous endeavor, but Legion took every precaution to ensure her safety. The interior corridor is heavily shielded (200 M.D.C. per 10 foot/3 m section of wall) and bristling with hundreds of defensive weapon emplacements. If anything within the bay presents any type of resistance, all weapon systems are immediately triggered. The entire Processing Bay becomes an inescapable corridor of death filled with laser fire, plasma blasts, and rail gun bursts. Everything within the bay suffers 6D6x10 M.D. every melee round until all invaders are destroyed. This also inflicts significant damage on the bay itself, but the Walker’s nanobots repair all damage within 4D6 minutes.
- **Nanobot Repair System:** The Factory Walker is covered in millions of nanobots that continuously make repairs to damaged systems. Even the most catastrophic damage can be repaired in time, but Legion usually just builds replacement parts to speed up the process. Damage to the main body regenerates at a rate of 1D4x10 M.D.C. per minute, and damage to the limbs and weapon systems regenerates at a rate of 3D6 M.D.C. per minute.
- **Satellite Uplink:** Legion designed a special satellite override that allows the Factory Walker to interface with the Machine’s

satellite network. It is the only thing keeping N.E.X.U.S. from targeting Legion's forces from orbit with military satellites. The last time she tried to target the Walker, Legion seized control of the very same satellite and used it to destroy three other satellites. Legion created thousands of backdoor access points to keep connected to the network, but N.E.X.U.S. is constantly working to shut them all down. It is a continuous battle that Legion seems to be winning for the moment. She is currently working on plans to launch her own network of satellites into orbit as a means to permanently remove the Machine's tactical advantage.

Number of Attacks per Melee: 25.

Combat Bonuses: +8 on initiative, +12 to strike with ranged weapons, +9 to strike with missiles, +3 to strike in close combat, dodging is not possible.

Prisonbot

Legion's primary goal is to transform every creature on the planet (both organic and inorganic) into a component of one gigantic cybernetic organism under her control and is demonstrated once again in her innovation of the Prisonbot. This robot serves as a mobile transport to preserve Legion's most prized possessions, pure living human and animal specimens.

The Prisonbot is devoted solely to the transportation and preservation of Legion's collection of living captives to be utilized in her twisted conversions. The robot will not engage in offensive combat scenarios unless Legion purposely possesses it to do otherwise. Its programmed specifically for defending itself and its cargo. Prisonbots follow Legion's Factor Walker coordinates religiously. Only upon rare occasion (8%) will Legion allow a Prisonbot to stray off course and this is usually due to her using the robot as bait to lure would-be rescue attempts for an ambush or to send the robot to a rendezvous spot if she is under heavy attack by N.E.X.U.S.

Legion's Factory Walker contains state-of-the-art manufacturing capabilities, which enable her to salvage metal, plastic, and other high-tech materials from the battlefields to construct her own unique robot designs like an efficient assembly line. However, the Factory Walker is currently incapable of using the same industrial production speed and methods to process living flesh. Legion prefers to apply intuitive thought, testing and innovation into living designs. This often causes Legion to convert living captives one at a time into cyborg minions. The conversion process takes time, but the facilities within the Factory Walker never stop. So while the Factory Walker is processing a captive, Legion obsessively ensures that her precious specimens are safe and secure near her side; ready to be transformed as soon as she is ready for the next victim.

Legion always goes through great efforts to make sure none of her human prisoners are severely harmed. They are far too rare to waste in petty conflicts, and she will gladly throw away a dozen robotic minions in order to protect and save one human. So when a Prisonbot is attacked, it is quickly protected and supported by her nearest forces, sometimes creating opportunistic openings to strike against the Factory Walker. Legion relies so heavily on the Factory Walker and her robotic forces to protect the Prisonbot that she has not designed it to be well-armed for combat. A Force

Field and Ion Pulse Gun Turrets mounted on its head serve as its only form of defense.

The Prisonbot resembles an enormous millipede, with each segmented chassis having a transparent caged cell atop its back. Each body segment of the Prisonbot has four independent armored legs with each leg being capable of supporting up to a maximum of 12 tons. Each of the Prisonbot's walking segments supports a massive cell that is 24 feet (7.3 m) wide by 50 feet (15.2 m) long and 14 feet tall (4.2 m). The cell can be one large cage or is segmented into separate cages. Legion will segment the interior of the cage cell with glass paneling if she detects that there is a significant threat to her captives. Threats such as rival Great Houses and alien predators are separated, but may be placed alongside one another if it amuses or intrigues Legion. Legion enjoys eavesdropping on her captives and learning more about the intricate social strife, psychological stresses and relationship dynamics of humans. It is these little details that Legion picks up on that helps hone her twisted schemes.

The specialized glass shielding is a reinforced, Mega-Damage, industrial aquarium type equipped with transitional lens capability that enables Legion to alter each glass panel from being completely transparent to fully tinted pitch-black in order to conceal the captives inside from any potential rescuers or attackers. The cells are fitted with internal sound dampening systems and shielding that mask heat signatures inside. The glass panels are framed in protective compound alloy, carbon-fiber ceramics. Each cage cell is equipped with its own air purifier, food and water dispenser, waste removal system and protective radiation shielding. All of the cage cells have a standard emergency system installed with ten small robotic tentacles to enforce security and safety protocols to ensure the stability of Legion's captives. The tentacles are equipped with sedative nerve gas ducts and defibrillator shock plating to subdue prisoners. Wall multiple cameras and loudspeakers also help monitor, reinforce and preserve Legion's control upon her specimens. If need be, she will utilize any combination of Cable Snakes, Hunter-Searcher Probes, Skitter Pods, Steel troopers and Slicer Robots to restore order inside the cage cells. These robots will not be allowed to kill any of her captives, though Legion doesn't mind wounding someone to send a clear warning to the rest of her prisoners. Any captive that manages to escape and is re-captured has a 65% chance of being cocooned in the super-strong carbon nanotube webbing by the smaller interior tentacles or by a Collector.

Prisonbots are designed to suit Legion's adaptive specifications and requirements that they can require as few as two cages or connect and interlock up to as many as 20 segmented cage cells. The amount of cage cells is based solely on the types and amount of captives being contained. If Legion desires, she can produce customized cells that can contain more formidable specimens such as large alien predators and Splicers. Typically, Legion will opt to carefully dissect pilots from their Host Armors or Living Body Armors (placing the discarded Biotech Armor into a separate container) before placing pilots into cages. However, with certain Splicers such as Biotics, Scarecrows or War Mounts, she knows what they are capable of and enjoys studying them. Such formidable captives may require Legion to reinforce paneling and frames (add 100 M.D.C. to panels and add 200 M.D.C. to frame). Due to limited resources, Legion rarely produces more cage cells than what she needs, as she prefers to produce more

minions to seek out and to hunt down more of the rare specimens versus wasting materials on empty walking cages.

Class: Mobile Prisoner Transport and Assault Robot.

M.D.C. by Location:

*Legs (4 per Cage Cell Segment) – 320 each

Ion Pulse Gun Turrets (4) – 50 each

Small Cage Interior Tentacles (10) – 60 each

**Cage Cell Camera Optics (4 per cage segment) – 25 each

***Main Sensor Hood – 275

****Main Body – 520

Force Field – 1,000. Remember, the force field must be depleted before damage can be inflicted to the robot's body.

* Destroying 1/4 of all legs reduces speed by 25%. This mobility reduction ratio is maintained as the amount of Cage Cells is added onto the Prisonbot. This means that a Prisonbot that has 3 Cage Cells (12 legs total) will require four of its legs to be destroyed before its speed is reduced by 25%. The higher the number of cage cells, the higher the number of legs that are required to reduce its speed.

** The camera optics are placed atop, below and mounted on each side of each cell and are very small targets that are difficult to hit. An attacker must aim and make a "Called Shot" to hit such targets and is -3 to strike.

*** Destroying the Main Sensory Hood will eliminate radar, most of the enhanced optics and sensory systems (not all optics as the cage cell cameras will still be operative), and reduces the number of melee attacks by half and combat bonuses to zero (unmodified die rolls only).

**** Depleting the M.D.C. of the Main Body will completely destroy the robot. The main body of the Prisonbot is considered the first leading cell cage and is distinguished by its Main Sensor Hood mounted on top. Each additional cage segment is considered a Host and will follow the main body unless Legion orders the Prisonbot to separate or do otherwise.

Speed:

Running: Maximum speed is 50 mph (80 km).

Leaping: 10 feet (3 m) high or across, increase by 50% with a short running start and double when running at full speed. 100 feet (30.5 m) high or across from jet thruster assisted leaps.

Digging: 10 mph (16 km) through sand or dirt. 5 mph (8 km) through clay, rock or stone.

Swimming: Not possible.

Flying: The jet thrusters were designed for short hops, but they can sustain flight. Maximum speed is only 50 mph (80 km).

Maximum Altitude: Limited to about 500 feet (152 m).

Range Limitations: Technically, the thrusters have no limit, but the Prisonbot will rarely fly for more than a few minutes at a time since the slow flight speed and maneuverability leaves it a sitting duck (-2 to dodge while flying).

Statistical Data:

Height: 15 feet (4.6 m) for the top of the cage cell, plus an additional 4 feet (1.2 m) for the Ion Pulse Gun Turret and Sensory Hood.

Width: 24 feet (7.3 m).

Length: 50 feet (15.2 m) per segmented cage cell. Maximum number of cage cells is 20 for a total of 1000 feet (305 m).

Weight: Each cage cell weighs 25 tons empty.

Physical Strength: Robotic P.S. of 50. Robotic P.S. of 24 for the small inner cage tentacles.

Cargo: Each cage cell can carry a maximum of 200 adult people packed like sardines. The Robot can carry a maximum cargo load of 48 tons per segment cage cell. This allows it to store the heavier Biotech-clad prisoners, some War Mounts and large alien predators. Some cages can open up to contain larger sized captives. Any salvage or carcasses are carried atop of the robot, not inside.

Power System: Standard.

Trade Value: None, except perhaps to a Technojacker.

Horror Factor: 15.

Senses and Features: Standard.

Number of Attacks per Melee: 4.

Combat Bonuses (includes bonuses from being controlled by the Legion personality): +3 on initiative, +5 to strike with ranged weapons, +3 to strike in hand to hand combat, +2 to parry, +1 to dodge, +1 to disarm, and +1 to roll with punch.

Penalties: The slow speed and poor maneuverability leaves the Prisonbot open to attack (-4 to dodge).

Skills of Note: Standard.

Weapon Systems:

1. Ion Pulse Gun Turrets (2): Mounted atop its massive sensory hood are quad-barrel ion pulse gun turrets that can rotate 360 degrees and have an arc of fire, up and down of 60 degrees.

Primary Purpose: Anti-Personnel and Defense.

Mega-Damage: 3D6 M.D. for a single blast, 6D6 M.D. from a twin blast or 1D6X10 M.D. from a four pulse burst firing simultaneously at a single target. Each of the Ion Pulse Gun Turrets can point and shoot at a different target or the same target, but each turret must roll for a separate attack (both clusters shooting at the same target counts as one attack).

Rate of Fire: Each blast or burst counts as one melee attack per each turret, but reduce the bonus to strike with ranged weapons by half when firing a burst.

Effective Range: 1,200 feet (366 m).

Payload: Effectively unlimited.

2. Small Collection Tentacles (10): The small collection tentacles are specifically designed for use against unarmored humans and other S.D.C. creatures, but that does not mean they are useless against more powerful opponents. Each tentacle still possesses impressive strength, and when all ten of these limbs combine their power, they can tear apart nearly any foe.

Primary Purpose: Collecting Raw Materials.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: The electric shock inflicts 2D6 S.D.C. plus the victim must make a roll to save vs stun of 15 or higher. On a failed roll, the target is completely paralyzed for one melee round, plus stunned for the next 2D4 melee rounds after that (-3 attacks per melee; -4 to strike, parry, and dodge; and speed is reduced by 40 percent). The electric shock from these tentacles is not strong enough to stun M.D.C. creatures or robots. Once the target is stunned, Legion may have one of her Collectors cocoon the victim in carbon nanotube webbing. The cocoon itself has 50 M.D.C., but victims with a robotic P.S. of 35 or higher can spend one melee round to break free of their bonds. The tentacles can continue to apply webbing to reinforce the cocoon. Every additional 20 feet (6.1 m) of webbing increases the M.D.C. of the cocoon by 30 M.D.C. and increases the P.S. required to break free by 20.

Rate of Fire: Activating the electric shock counts as one melee attack (it does not require any melee attacks to maintain the shock, but that tentacle cannot be used for anything else). Applying 20 feet (6.1 m) of webbing counts as one melee attack.

Effective Range: The tentacles have a reach of 8 feet (2.4 m), and the nanotube webbing can be applied up to 10 feet (3 m) away.

Payload: Electrical blasts are effectively unlimited. The Prisonbot contains a total of 200 feet (61 m) of nanotube webbing. All the tentacles are supplied from the Cage cell's reserve and have to be refilled by the Factory Walker.

3. Hand to Hand Combat: Rather than use long-range weapons, the Prisonbot can engage in hand to hand combat using its tentacles and legs.

Kick: 2D6 M.D.

Stomp: 4D6 M.D. But the stomp is only effective against objects 12 feet (3.7 m) or smaller.

Stampede: 2D6X10 M.D. stampeding over objects of 8 feet (2.4 m) or smaller.

Body Block/Ram: 6D6 M.D. to targets as large as 30 feet (9.1 m) tall and has a 01-85% chance of knocking an opponent off his feet.

Non-Player Characters

Archos

Though fairly young, Archos is proving to be one of Great House Artemis' prized sources of intel. From the beginning, Archos distinguished himself and has received numerous decorations for his bravery, ingenuity, and tireless efforts. Despite the many accolades he's received in his short career, Archos rarely stays at the Great House for longer than a few days at a time. The Deliveryman is most at home on the surface, braving its countless dangers.

Archos has wandered a great deal and seems to know a lot about the world around him. He often downplays the extent of how much he exactly knows because he refuses to be stabbed and mentally probed by the Deluvane Librarians and doesn't want to attract their attention. Archos usually conducts himself with a cool head, being cautious, thinking and analyzing various outcomes before he acts. The time alone in the wilderness has made him humble, fairly reserved, quiet and keeping mostly to himself. However, he can be quite outgoing and cheerful when relaxed and comfortable. Though accustomed to operating on his own, Archos is an excellent guide and team player, always quick to lend a hand when needed.

Despite his distant personality, Archos can be quite fiery. He tries to use his head and stay cool under fire, which can be difficult. He often has to fight against himself, staying calm and struggling to act out of logic and not emotion. He feels he is constantly fighting to do the right thing and despises feeling tempted or being selfish and callous. Though he may consider himself flawed, Archos is tough, independent, self-reliant and exceptionally brave.

Race: Human.

Alignment: Unprincipled.

Attributes: I.Q. 18, M.E. 19 M.A. 15, P.S. 12, P.P. 19, P.E. 26, P.B. 10, Spd 25.

Hit Points: 47. **S.D.C.:** 64.

Weight: 180 lbs (81.6 kg).

Height: 6 feet (1.8 m).

Age: 27. **Sex:** Male.

Appearance: Archos rarely reveals himself, and operates most of the time under the mask of his Host Armor. Even when he is allotting time for his Host Armor, Nighthawk to be rejuvenated in a nutrient bath, he usually wears a large robe that drapes low enough to cover most of his face and he usually disappears into the crags of a haven or into his personal bunker until his Armor is ready or until he has a mission to fulfill.

Experience Level: 5th level Deliveryman.

Skills:

Common: Basic Math 90%, Speak: English 92%, Literacy: English 96%.

Survivalist: Wilderness Survival 84%, Carpentry 74%, Fasting 81%, Hunting, Preserve Food 79%.

Undercover: Disguise 64%, Imitate Voices & Sounds 81%/75%, Impersonation 65%/49%, Surveillance 69%.

Reconnaissance/Scout: Detect Ambush 74%, Detect Concealment 69%, Intelligence 72%, Land Navigation 76%, Prowl 71%.

Outdoorsmanship: Climbing 89/79%, Identify Plants & Fruits 79%, Outdoorsmanship, Swimming 98%, Spelunking 89%.

Hunter/Trapper: Skin & Prepare Animal Hides 79%, Track & Trap Animals 74%/84%, Zoology 74%.

Electives: Concealment 75%, Bio-Comms 24%, Tracking 69%, Camouflage 54%, Hand to Hand: Expert, W.P. Bio-Weapons: Light [+3 strike), W.P. Sword (+2 strike, +2 parry, +1 thrown), Pick Locks 69%, Blind Fighting 44%, and W.P. Armor (+1D6 damage).

Secondary: Astronomy & Navigation 44%, Cooking 59%, Speak: Japanese 74%, Running, Literacy: Japanese 59%.

Combat Training: Hand to Hand: Expert.

Attacks per Melee: 5.

Combat Bonuses: +2 initiative, +5 strike, +6 parry, +6 dodge, +3 pull punch, +2 roll with punch/fall/impact, +2 disarm.

Other Combat Info: Kick Attack (1D8), Karate Punch (2D4), Karate Kick (2D6), +4% to all skills, +2 Perception Rolls, +2 vs Psionics/Insanity, +6 vs Horror Factor, +20% vs Coma/Death, +5 vs Magic/Poison.

Weapons of Note:

1. Light Cell Laser Pistol – Damage: 1D8-3D8 M.D., Range: 1,000 feet (305 m), +2 strike.

2. Shard Assault Rifle – Damage: 1D10 M.D. short burst or 2D10 M.D. heavy burst, Range: 1,200 feet (366 m), Payload: 24 short bursts or 12 heavy bursts, +1 strike.

3. Tarkov Carbon Fiber Vibro-Long Sword – Damage: 2D6 M.D. (or 2D6 S.D.C. if the Vibro Field is turned off), +1 initiative, +1 strike, +1 parry.

Archos' Host Armor – Nighthawk

Nighthawk is a Host Armor that resembles a dark, chitin-armored knight wearing a snake-skin hood and cloak. Nighthawk's helmet resembles a stealthy looking samurai mask with its faceplate and sleek, sinister eyes. The armor is well poised for all ranges of combat, but is designed with stealth and killing power as the main focuses. Each arm has a forearm gauntlet that houses a retractable bone blade, each dipped in black paint. Nighthawk's

right shoulder has a Casting Launcher and the left shoulder has a cluster of five Organic Rockets.

Class: Host Armor (organic power armor).

Crew: Archos.

Level: 5th Level Deliveryman.

Total Bio-E Spent: 90.

Bio-E Remaining: None.

Base M.D.C. by Location:

Hands (2) – 60 each

Arms (2) – 120 each

Legs (2) – 140 each

Feet (2) – 70 each

Forearm Bone Blades (2) – 78 each

Right Shoulder Casting Launcher – 70

Organic Rockets (5) – 11 each. Mounted on Left Shoulder.

*Head – 90

**Main Body – 361

Speed:

Running: Maximum 110 mph (176 km).

Leaping: 20 feet (6.1 m) high or 40 feet (12.2 m) across from a standing position.

Digging: 20 mph (32 km).

Swimming: 30 mph (48 km/26 knots).

Underwater Depth: Withstand pressure up to 700 feet (213.4 m) deep.

Flying: Flight is not possible.

Statistical Data:

Height: 7 feet (2.1 m).

Width: 4 feet (1.2 m).

Length: 3 feet (0.9 m).

Weight: 400 pounds (180 kg).

Cargo: None, other than what can be carried in hand, pouches, hidden pockets, etc.

Physical Strength: 28 Splicer P.S.

Operational Lifetime: 50 years.

Bio-Regeneration Rate: 2D6 M.D.C. per hour for the main body and 1D4 M.D.C. per hour for all other locations.

Horror Factor: 7.

Senses & Features: Standard, plus Stealth Field, Enhanced Neurological Connections, Circadian Rhythm, Electromagnetic Vision, Nightvision Eyes.

Feeding: Consumes 2D4 of Archos' Hit Points each day that Nighthawk is worn. Can survive up to 2D4 days without feeding before the effects of starvation kick in.

Sleep Requirements: As a parasitic organism, the Host Armor does not require sleep or rest, but its pilot does.

Combat Bonuses: +2 attacks, +5 initiative, +3 strike, +2 parry, +2 dodge, +2 automatic dodge, +4 roll with fall, +3 pull punch, +3 disarm. (These bonuses are in *addition* to Archos's already impressive bonuses.)

Instinctive Skills: Escape Artist 55%, Camouflage 50%, Wilderness Survival 70%.

Weapons:

1. Forearm Bone Blades (2): Damage: 4D6 M.D., +2 strike, +1 parry, +1 disarm, and +1 pull punch. Also has the Opti-Upgrade: Critical Strike on 19-20. One blade mounted on each forearm.

2. Casting Launcher (1): Damage: 3D8 per single shot and 1D8x10 per 4 round burst. Range: 1,400 feet (427 m). Payload:

60 rounds. Bonuses: +1 strike on *aimed* shots only. Mounted over the right shoulder.

3. Organic Rockets (5): Damage: 5D10 per Organic Rocket. Range: One mile (1.6 km). Rate of Fire: 1, 2, 3, 4 or ALL! Bonuses: + 5 strike and dodge. Mounted over the left shoulder.

4. Hand to Hand Combat: Expert.

Restrained Punch/Swat: 1D4 M.D.

Full Strength Punch: 1D6 M.D.

Power Punch: 2D6 M.D. (counts as two melee attacks).

Bone Blade Slash/Thrust: 5D6 M.D.

Power Bone Blade Slash/Thrust: 1D6x10 M.D.

Kick: 2D4 M.D.

Leap Kick: 2D8 M.D. (counts as two melee attacks).

Head Butt: 1D4 M.D.

Body Flip/Throw: 1D6 M.D.

Body Block/Ram: 2D4 M.D.

Black Talon War Hawk, Altai Zeta

Altai Zeta is a Golden Eagle-styled War Hawk gifted to Archos from House Arcadia as a sign of appreciation and respect for the Great House of Artemis to sell the War Hawk DNA to House Arcadia. The Bioweapons market is fierce and such exchanges help reinforce strong bonds between arms dealers and developers. Golden Zeta is from an exceptional royal bloodline of War Hawks as his DNA was created from one of the War Hawks that the War Lady Arcadia has among her flock. Great House Arcadia has a wealth of avian DNA samples including various raptors, and they wanted to share the Golden Eagle DNA with Artemis as a sign of appreciation.

Alignment: Unprincipled.

Attributes: I.Q. 11, M.E. 15, M.A. 14, P.S. 12, P.P. 20, P.E. 19, P.B. 13, Spd 10 mph (16 km) on the ground, 200 mph (320 km) in the air.

M.D.C. by Location:

Wings (2) – 18 each

Legs (2) – 12 each

Clawed Feet (2) – 8 each

*Head – 15

**Main Body – 70

Description: A large, magnificent Golden Eagle from House Arcadia, Altai Zeta is extremely protective of Archos. In the field, Altai flies ahead while surveying the landscape for potential threats to Archos and itself. Altai will only attack when attacked first or when ordered to by Archos.

Height: 7 inches (0.18 m).

Length: 33 inches (0.8 m).

Wingspan: 7 feet (2.1 m).

Weight: 13 lbs (5.9 kg).

Age: 6 years old.

Senses & Features: Standard for War Mounts plus: Super Regeneration (1D4 M.D.C. per melee), Surveillance Bio-Comm, and a Stealth Field.

Bio-Weapon Systems:

1. Plasma Breath: The mouth, throat, and lungs of the War Hawk have been modified to allow it to exhale a chemical spray that ignites on contact with air to create a powerful fire blast.

Mega-Damage: 4D12.

Range: 40 feet (12.2 m).

Payload: 18 blasts. One blast is regenerated per hour.

Bonuses: +4 to strike, but this is the only bonus that applies to the Plasma Breath.

2. Stinger Talons: The feet of the War Hawk end in three-inch long, razor sharp talons. Despite the limited strength of the Black Talon, its claws are strong enough to rend through the steel armor of the Machine's forces. It allows the tiny creature to inflict relatively decent damage, but the real purpose of these talons is to inject highly corrosive acid. The acid quickly dissolves metal and other inorganic metals, but is relatively harmless to living tissue.

Mega-Damage: One claw does 2D4 points of damage and 4D4 for a double claw strike. Once injected, the acid burns for 2D4 melee rounds and inflicts 2D6 points of Mega-Damage each melee (double damage from a double claw strike). It only inflicts 1D4 points of S.D.C. damage each melee to organic material.

3. Skills of Note: Land Navigation 90%, Surveillance 75%, Prowl 75%, Demolitions 40%, Demolitions Disposal 40%, Pick Locks 45%, Understands English and Japanese 85%, Read English and Japanese 45%. Recognize robots, Machines, and rodents as enemies to be destroyed or chased away.

Great House Deluvane Strike Team Stats

Below are the write-ups and stats for the Strike Teams derived from Great House of Deluvane. Game Masters, please feel free to utilize these Non-Player Characters (NPCs) throughout this adventure to help generate intriguing interactions, camaraderie, competition and subtle suspicions that all help sculpt wonderful interaction and gaming experience. However, the Strike Team NPCs should not be used by the players as a reliable crutch. The NPCs should be just as busy in the field as the players are. Limited Bio-Comm communications when in the 6 mile (9.6 km) range and when appropriate are fine, but certainly keep the spotlight and threats on the players. After all, it is the players' Great House that is in Legion's path. We have flushed these NPCs stats out for you just in case you would also like to utilize them as pre-gen templates for future adventures.

Dreadguard Christian Aramis, Call Sign "Stinger"

A soldier that has risen through the ranks of infantrymen and Roughnecks to become one of the elite Dreadguard. Christian is a hardcore soldier and excellent tactician that is dedicated to destroying N.E.X.U.S., and he leads his regiment of infantrymen into battle. Although some individuals may grumble about how he leads from the outer perimeters or the rear, his results always quiet his detractors. Between his strategic use of his troops and the overwhelming firepower of his Host Armor he calls "Barrage," Christian Aramis is a force to be reckoned with.

Attributes: I.Q. 21, M.E. 16, M.A. 18, P.S. 17, P.P. 12, P.E. 16, P.B. 11, Spd 19.

Alignment: Principled.

Experience Level: 6th level Dreadguard.

Skills of Note: Standard Dreadguard skill programs, plus: Infantryman – First Aid, Forced March, Running, Hand to Hand: Expert, and W.P. Bio-Weapons: Light.

Host Armor "Barrage"

Barrage resembles a sleek, yet heavily armored, Japanese Hornet-styled knight. The style of armor is chitin and very insect-like, with smooth curved, Bio-Armored plating and a wonderful emerald green shell color with a yellow underbelly and dark stripes along his arms, legs and parts of his back and helmet. Barrage's shoulders are massive in comparison to the rest of the body and they house an array of heavy armament to rain down upon enemies from above or from the surface. Christian enjoys engaging enemies, strategically combining high speed tactics using Barrage's insect wings and organic boosters for fast-paced agility and strafing strikes while hovering only several feet above ground. Barrage is often seen weaving in and out and around objects at high speeds, launching a barrage of mixed attacks at enemies. Christian is not afraid to mix it up with aerial threats and will take flight in order to rain down volleys of organic missiles, Bio-Energy Vent bursts or blasts from his Heat Cannon at ground targets. If Barrage is allotted a good opportunity and when there little concern about drawing attention, Christian may engage his Omega blaster at major targets from above as well. Christian however, often avoids this as he doesn't like being in one place in a battle for too long as it makes him an easy target.

Adversaries have a hard time getting a clean shot or lock on Barrage as it is always seen mixing it up with fast flying insect like movements that are embellished with sudden bursts from organic thrusters and zigzagging motions. It is said that if it weren't for the heavy armament that Archangels seem to lack, that Christian would have instantly signed up to be one of them. Christian is daring, just not as daring as the legendary Archangels.

Metabolism: Omnivore.

Base M.D.C. by Location:

Arms (2) – 125 each

Hands (2) – 60 each

Forearm Bio-Energy Expulsion Vents (2) – 52 each

Left Shoulder-Mounted Heat Projector Cannon – 120

Legs (2) – 165 each

Hornet/Wasp Wings (2) – 190 each

Organic Rockets (10) – 11 each (-3 to hit on a "Called Shot").

Omega Blaster Protective Chest Plate – 100

Organic Thrusters (6) – 120 each

Organic Thruster Ports (4) – 50 each

Head – 135

Main Body – 299

Speed:

Running: 60 mph (96 km).

Leaping: 20 feet (6.1 m) high or 40 feet (12.2 m) across from a standing position.

Digging: 20 mph (32 km). Only one quarter the speed through rock and concrete.

Swimming: 30 mph (48 km/26 Knots). With organic thrusters engaged, maximum speed is 100 mph (160 km/86.9 knots).

Underwater Depth: Maximum depth 700 feet (213 m).

Flight: Winged Flight (insect wings can propel Barrage to a maximum speed of 100 mph (160 km) with a maximum altitude ceiling of 15,000 feet (4,572 m). With only the Wasp wings engaged, Barrage can fly like an insect that is fully capable of VTOL capabilities and insect like maneuvers and agility, that only an ace pilot accustomed to such flight tactics can withstand and brace for. However, when Christian needs to really add in the speed, he

engages his organic boosters mounted into his armored jet pack and calves like a vectored thrust jet engine which thrusts Barrage to a maximum of 280 mph (448 km), with a maximum altitude of 25,000 feet (7,620 m).

Statistical Data:

Height: 7 feet (2.1 m).

Width: 5 feet (1.5 m). Wingspan: 12 feet (3.7 m).

Length: 3 feet (0.9 m).

Weight: 540 pounds (243 kg), including Christian's weight.

Physical Strength: 21 Splicer Strength (equivalent to Robot).

Horror Factor: 7 for humans, none against Machines.

Sensors and features: Standard, plus: Winged Flight (Insect Wings, 100 mph/160 km), Organic Thrusters (280 mph/448 km), Stealth Field, Enhanced Neurological Connections, Resistant to Heat, Kinetic Energy, and Physical Attacks.

Known Weapons: (2) Bio-Energy Expulsion Vents (1 on each forearm), Heat Projector Cannon (mounted on the left shoulder), (10) Organic Rockets (5 mounted on the right shoulder and (5 mounted between the main thrusters), and an Omega Blaster.

Number of Attacks: 5.

Combat Bonuses:

Metabolism Bonuses: +2 initiative, +1 to strike in hand to hand combat, +2 to parry, +1 to dodge, +1 to pull punch, +2 to roll with fall. Base instincts that provide Dowsing (50%), Identify Plants & Fruits 60%, Land Navigation (60%), Prowl 40%, Track Animals (40%) and Wilderness Survival (50%).

Enhanced Neurological Connections Bonuses: +2 initiative, +1 to disarm, +2 to automatic dodge.

Wing Bonuses: +1 initiative, +1 to strike, +2 to dodge, +1 to roll with a fall or impact in flight.

Organic Thruster Bonuses when in Flight: +1 on initiative, +1 to strike, +2 to dodge, and +2 to roll with fall or impact in flight.

Bio-Energy Expulsion Vents Bonus: +3 to strike on a carefully aimed Vent shot only.

Stealth Field Bonuses: 90% undetectable standing still, 80% moving leisurely (walking pace or slower), 60% if jogging at half speed and 33% moving at full speed. Normal vision, infrared optics, thermal imaging systems, and heat sensors nor Nightvision can see through the stealth field. -20 to Read Sensory Equipment skill of those trying to locate and/or track the invisible character.

Organic Rocket Bonuses: Each Rocket has one attack per melee round, a bonus of +5 to strike and dodge, until it strikes its target, shot down (destroyed) or until it dies in 2D4 melee rounds.

Omega Blaster Bonus: +2 to strike on an aimed shot.

Dreadguard O.C.C. Bonuses: +2 to save vs mind control (drugs, psionics, etc.). +3 to save vs Horror Factor.

Skill Bonuses: Hand to Hand: Expert: +2 to pull punch and +2 to roll with impact/punch/fall. Level 2: +3 to parry and dodge, +1 to pull punch. Level 3: +2 to strike, +2 to disarm. Level 4: +1 attack per melee action/round. Level 6: Critical Strike on an unmodified roll of 18, 19 or 20. W.P. Bio-Weapons: Light: +1 to strike at levels 1, 3 and 5 (total +3 to Strike with Light Bio-Weapons).

Dreadguard Leon Valentino

Leon Valentino is a calculating, artisan of a fighter who enjoys hunting formidable Machines and alien predators and prides himself as being the focal threat in the field to anyone that is of a rival

Great House. Leon was a Roughneck that excelled so much in the field that he was drafted into higher ranks by the unanimous support accrued by his fellow infantry. Ironically, Valentino doesn't like to lead large forces, but enjoys being a hero and inspiration for others. Despite his predatory tactics in the field that might give anyone the impression that he must be a tattered, war-torn hero, Valentino is actually a suave, sex symbol of a man, (model quality) that has long, flowing black hair and five o'clock shadow who enjoys studying and obtaining knowledge of the Golden Age. Valentino is particularly fond of Ancient hero stories and the ancient martial arts. Unlike most Dreadguards, he enjoys talking to House Librarians to gain knowledge on the lost arts and sharing ancient hero stories. Leon has also begun to view himself as a modern-day Achilles, Heracles or Perseus and hopes to die in some epic moment in history, being remembered as a source of heroic inspiration for the next generations in the Resistance. If the moment is not epic enough, he will refuse to die during it. Leon is actually being strategically groomed by a Librarian to challenge the Deluvane Warlord someday for leadership. An array of myths and cleverly spun stories are instilled into Valentino to help him formulate the ideas that the Librarians want him to think. When not in the field or in the Library, Valentino enjoys training Biotics for the Gladiatorial Arena fights that transpire in some havens.

Valentino's Host Armor, "Shadow Fury," resembles a robust Smilodon panther (black color) that has blue, iridescent stripes along its armor like a Bengal tiger that can be seen only in direct sunlight. Shadow Fury is well-armed, scentless and has growing reputation as a feared fighter on the battlefield. Valentino enjoys taking her out for hunts or stalking the most formidable adversaries among the chaos of a battle. Shadow Fury's signature and perhaps the most dreaded move in battle is her delivery of a powerful vise-like bite into the nape of the neck or the helmet of an opponent. This maneuver not only does massive damage to the Machine, War Mount or Armor, but in the case of a Host Armor or Living Body Armor, it also punctures the skull of the pilot inside.

Attributes: I.Q. 17, M.E. 11, M.A. 16, P.S. 23, P.P. 21, P.E. 20, P.B. 19, Spd 12.

Alignment: Unprincipled.

S.D.C.: 82 S.D.C., **Hit Points:** 45.

Experience Level: 4th Level Dreadguard.

Skills of Note: Standard Dreadguard skill programs, plus: Martial Artist – Hand to Hand: Martial Arts, Kickboxing, Wrestling, Boxing, W.P. Paired, W.P. Blunt, and W.P. Sword.

"Shadow Fury" Host Armor

Metabolism: Carnivore.

Base M.D.C. by Location:

Arms (2) – 125 each

Forearm Blades (2) – 80 each

Light Bore Cannon – 80

Hands (2) – 60 each

Retractable Medium Claws (10) – 10 each

Legs (2) – 165 each

Paws/Feet (2) – 90 each

Flying Blades (6) – 11 each (-4 to strike on a Called Shot).

Tentacle Harpoon – 60

Head – 135

Saber Teeth (2) – 20 each

Main Body – 299

Speed:

Running: 60 mph (96 km).

Leaping: 20 feet (6.1 m) high or 40 feet (12.2 m) across from a standing position.

Digging: 20 mph (32 km). Only one quarter the speed through rock and concrete.

Swimming: 30 mph (48 km/26 Knots).

Underwater Depth: Maximum depth 700 feet (213.4 m).

Statistical Data:

Height: 8 feet (2.4 m) tall including the panthera head weapons platform; Valentino's actual head is located in the Host Armor's helmet chamber in the upper chest.

Width: 4 feet (1.2 m).

Length: 3 feet (0.9 m), 8 feet (2.4 m) including a 5 foot (1.5 m) tail.

Weight: 620 pounds (279 kg), including Leon's weight.

Physical Strength: 28 Splicer Strength (equivalent to Robot).

Horror Factor: 8 for humans, none against Machines.

Sensors and Features: Standard, plus: Nightvision Eyes, Motion Detection, Regeneration: Enhanced, Stealth Field, Ambidextrous, and Enhanced Neurological Connections.

Known Weapons: Acid Blood, Bio-Energy Expulsion Vent, Medium Claws, x2 Retractable Forearm Blades (4D6 M.D.), Light Bore Cannon, x6 Flying Blades, Medium Saber Teeth and a Tentacle Harpoon (Leon has been known to yell "Get over here!" when impaling targets).

Number of attacks: 7.

Combat Bonuses:

Metabolism Bonuses: +3 on initiative, +2 to strike, +1 to parry and dodge, +1 to pull punch, +3 to roll with fall, and +2D6 to Spd, as well as base instinctive skills of Land Navigation (70%), Track People (65%), Track Animals (80%), and Wilderness Survival (60%).

Bio-Energy Expulsion Vent Bonus: +3 to strike on a carefully aimed Vent shot only.

Ambidextrous Bonuses: +1 attack per melee round, +1 to entangle, automatically gets W.P. Paired Weapons skill in Host Armor, +5 to Climbing, Demolitions, Escape Artist, Pick Locks, Palming, Concealment and other sleight of hand skills.

Enhanced Neurological Connections Bonuses: +2 initiative, +1 to disarm, +2 to automatic dodge.

Stealth Field Bonuses: 90% undetectable standing still, 80% moving leisurely (walking pace or slower), 60% if jogging at half speed and 33% moving at full speed. Neither normal vision, infrared optics, thermal imaging systems, heat sensors nor Nightvision can see through the stealth field. -20 to Read Sensory Equipment skill of those trying to locate and/or track the invisible character.

Motion Detection Bonuses: +1 on initiative, +1 to parry, +2 to roll with punch, fall or impact, +4 to automatic dodge.

Medium Claws Bonuses: +2D6 M.D. in addition to punch damage.

Dreadguard O.C.C. Bonuses: +2 to save vs mind control (drugs, psionics, etc.). +3 to save vs Horror Factor.

Skill Bonuses: Boxing: +1 attack per melee. +2 to parry and dodge, +1 to roll with punch or fall. Hand to Hand: Martial Arts: +3 to pull punch and +3 to roll with impact/punch/fall. Level 2:

+3 to parry and dodge, +2 to strike. Level 3: +1 to initiative. Level 4: +1 attack per melee action/round.

Wrestling: +1 to roll with punch or fall.

W.P. Blunt: +2 to strike (from levels 1 & 3).

W.P. Sword: +2 to strike (from levels 1 & 3), +2 to parry (from levels 2 & 4), +1 to strike when throwing a sword weapon.

Dreadguard Cameron Morecraft

This Dreadguard is either an eccentric, witty mad-scientist playing the role or is a severely insane genius who has been extremely lucky to make it this far in life. Cameron is all over the place as far as his choices in enhancements and customizations and nothing seems to make sense in what he has devised, but yet in the heat of battle, he somehow makes everything come together and becomes a powerful force of destruction against those in his wake.

Cameron's Host Armor, "Masterpiece," is a wonderfully engineered work of art, as he sees it. It resembles a robust Red Kangaroo with massive, gorilla-like arms. The more Cameron adds to it and utilizes it in battle, the more it brings his bizarre vision to fruition. What's weird is that some of the infantry who serve under his leadership are beginning to understand and can relate situations that support the innovative decisions made by Cameron and his field performance with Masterpiece.

Attributes: I.Q. 27, M.E. 8, M.A. 17, P.S. 15, P.P. 12, P.E. 16, P.B. 12, Spd 18.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Experience Level: 2nd level Dreadguard.

Skills of Note: Standard Dreadguard skill programs, plus: Science – Biology, Xenology, Zoology, W.P. Whip, Acrobatics.

"Masterpiece" Host Armor

Metabolism: Herbivore.

Base M.D.C. by Location:

Arms (2) – 125 each

Hands (2) – 60 each

Legs (2) – 165 each

Paws/Feet (2) – 90 each

Head – 135

Main Body – 299

Speed:

Running: 60 mph (96 km).

Leaping: 20 feet (6.1 m) high or 40 feet (12.2 m) across from a standing position.

Digging: 20 mph (32 km). Only one quarter the speed through rock and concrete.

Swimming: 30 mph (48 km/26 Knots).

Underwater Depth: Maximum depth 700 feet (213.4 m).

Statistical Data:

Height: 7 feet, 5 inches (2.3 m). Cameron's actual head is located in Masterpiece's helmet chamber in the upper chest.

Width: 4 feet, 5 inches (1.37 m) shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 3 feet (0.9 m), plus a 6 foot (1.8 m) tail.

Weight: 620 pounds (279 kg), including Cameron's weight.

Physical Strength: 28 Splicer Strength (equivalent to Robot).

Horror Factor: 6 for humans, none against Machines.

Sensors and Features: Standard, plus Macro-Vision, Forked Tongue, Enhanced Leaping, and Leaping Legs.

Known Weapons: x4 Stabbing Tendrils (2 per hand), Combat Tail, Casting Launcher, Electrical Discharge, and x4 Screamer Grenades.

Bombardier

– Martin “Brody” Broderick

An Infantryman and later a Roughneck, “Brody” as his friends call him, has seen his share of death and devastation. He grew tired of seeing his comrades die because they rushed headlong into overwhelming N.E.X.U.S. forces. He became frustrated at not being able to hit the Machine when it would launch attacks from beyond the reach of most of the Resistance’s weapons. When his House got their own Bombardiers, Brody jumped at the opportunity to enlist in their ranks. Finally able to fight fire with fire, Brody is able to provide his fellow soldiers the firepower they need.

Attributes: I.Q. 16, M.E. 21, M.A. 12, P.S. 28, P.P. 13, P.E. 16, P.B. 10, Spd 30.

Alignment: Unprincipled.

Experience Level: 9th Level Bombardier.

Skills of Note: W.P. Bio-Weapons: Light, W.P. Bio-Weapons: Heavy, Hand to Hand: Commando, Boxing, Wrestling, Vital Points: Machine, Wilderness Survival, Prowl, Detect Ambush, Intelligence, Operate Bio-Equipment, Military Fortification, and Demolitions.

Living Body Armor Notes: Chitinous Armor (240 M.D.C.) with all of the standard features, plus: Additional set of Advanced Eyes in front (replacing his personal vision when his helmet is worn), Armored Eyes (front pair/visor), Nightvision Eyes, Advanced Senses, and Chameleon Skin. **Known Living Armor Weapons:** Light Gore Cannon, and 2 Organic Rockets. Brody has been seen carrying his favorite Bio-Energy Rifle as well as some Migs and Chigs (1D4+1 of each). **Mantis Support Cannons:** Brody controls four Mantis Support Cannons; 2 Casting Cannons, 1 Gore Cannon and 1 Quill Storm Cannon.

Bombardier

– Megan “Boom Boom” Shields

As a young teen, Megan witnessed the entirety of her Retro-Village slowly destroyed by the “metal monsters” from the north just as a young Dreadguard, Christian Aramis, and a company of Roughnecks arrived and destroyed the monsters. Megan and a handful of other survivors were brought back to House Deluvane and integrated into its society. Wanting to fight back against the metal monsters that she learned to know as N.E.X.U.S and the Machine, Boom Boom, who has a penchant for blowing things up, joined the Bombardier regiment being created at the time.

Attributes: I.Q. 16, M.E. 16, M.A. 12, P.S. 20, P.P. 18, P.E. 14, P.B. 17, Spd 27.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Experience Level: 7th level Bombardier.

Skills of Note: W.P. Bio-Weapons: Light, W.P. Bio-Weapons: Heavy, W.P. Archery, Hand to Hand: Martial Arts, Gymnastics, Prowl, Running, Intelligence, Vital Points: Organic, Trap Construction, Trap and Mine Detection, Seduction, and Card Shark.

Living Body Armor Notes: Chitinous Armor (230 M.D.C.) with all of the standard features, plus: Additional set of Advanced Eyes in front (replaces Megan’s normal vision when her helmet is worn, Electromagnetic Vision, Enhanced Sight x2, and Motion Detection).

Known Living Armor Weapons: Medium Claws (Retractable), Combat Spurs, Bio-Energy Expulsion Vent, and 2 Screamer Grenades. Boom Boom is also known to carry a Bio-Rocket Slinger and a Pinaak Longbow with a variety of arrows taken from a fallen Pariah from the Great House Shiva (**The Rifter® #37 and #38**). **Mantis Support Cannons:** Megan controls 3 Mantis Support Cannons; 1 Casting Cannon, 1 Acid Cannon, and 1 Omega Cannon.

Packmaster Natasha London

Natasha was an orphan that was brought to the Great House of Deluvane by a Packmaster out on recon. Packmaster Hinks discovered the mother and the toddler being viciously mauled by a pack of Necroborgs. Hinks and his Gorehounds managed to destroy the Necroborgs and escorted the wounded mother to the closest outpost for treatment. The outpost didn’t belong to Hink’s Great House of Artemis, but the severely wounded mother desperately needed medical treatment and he was able to get her and Natasha to an outpost within his House’s alliance. The Great House of Deluvane was glad to treat them and took them in. Hinks could not stay however, and as he had to return to House Artemis, he would pay them visits to check up on them when he could. Natasha grew up to think of Hinks as her father, even though her mother explained that he was not. She felt that her mother was lying to try and protect her heart, and she wanted for Hinks to fill that void, even if he wasn’t. Hinks never returned after a major attack transpired at Bell Lake years ago. Natasha decided that she would replace the good that the world had taken from her, she would fulfill the walk of Hinks, and she immediately trained to become a Packmaster.

Now a full-fledged Packmaster, this sexy doll is a no-holds barred, all serious business type of gal who fights with committed passion for the survival her House and will go beyond orders to secure the lives of her comrades and her Gorepack. Natasha has seen many warriors die in the field and she has shed many tears with their families back at the Haven. This has made Natasha a somewhat ruthless heroine as she plays rough with her pack, will slap the taste out of a cynical-mouthed soldier and will push everyone to their very limits to ensure that they don’t jeopardize the safety of others so that everyone can hopefully make it home. Despite her firm attitude, she is often not taken seriously as some soldiers tend to be awestruck with her beauty and are aggressively reminded that they have not been paying close enough attention to what she has just ordered or said during mission briefs. So many infantry have placed themselves in harm’s way trying to be the hero in a mission in attempts to win her affection. This has led to many unfortunate disasters and only motivates Natasha to be more standoffish from her comrades. While others view her beauty as a blessing, the lives lost trying to win her heart has made her begin to second guess her alluring beauty as a possible curse. London fights depression due to those who have lost their lives, but her pack reinforces her attitude and they will charge anyone that challenges her. Even some Dreadguards have been tackled upon rare occasion, often leading to Natasha

being severely chastised later in the haven. Natasha is plagued with nightmares and only the devoted love for her pack and their reciprocated love, loyalty and individual personalities keep her from losing her sanity.

Race: Human.

Attributes: I.Q. 17, M.E. 15, M.A. 21, P.S. 16, P.P. 19, P.E. 20, P.B. 24, Spd 20.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Experience Level: 5th Level Packmaster.

Weight: 120 pounds (54 kg). **Height:** 5 feet, 7 inches (1.7 m).

Hit Points: 21. **S.D.C.:** 35 (includes all skill bonuses).

Age: 22. **Sex:** Female.

Skills of Note: Surveillance (78%), Camouflage (38%), Intelligence (42%), Operate Bio-Equipment (60%), Detect Ambush (50%), Detect Concealment (45%), Art (43%), Language and Literacy (90%), Cooking (48%) and Fencing (+1D6 damage with swords).

Combat Training: Hand to Hand: Expert.

Attacks per Melee: 5.

Combat Bonuses: +2 to Pull Punch, +1 to Strike and +1D6 to damage with sword and dagger, +2 to Roll with punch, fall or impact. +1 to initiative, +1 to parry and dodge, +2 to save vs Horror Factor and Bio-Comm installed.

Special Notes: Specialized training with a Swords and Sabers. Extremely attractive with curly blond hair, Brazilian facial features and an alluring, athletic, well-toned shape. Large, almond-shaped eyes, with hazel irises and a beauty mark on her left cheek.

London's Living Body Armor

Natasha's Packmaster armor is based on the standard Packmaster design, with some minor modifications. It is sleeker in helmet design with a visor instead of a circular optic plate.

Base M.D.C. by Location: Arms (2): 79 each, Forearm Retractable Sabers (2): 16. Legs(2): 77 each, Shoulder/Neck: 48, Collar: 18, *Moth-Styled Antennae (4): 15 each, **Helmet: 70, and ***Main Body: 132.

Statistical Data:

Senses & Features: Antennas (2) and a pair of Eye Stalks equipped with Enhanced Sight and Electromagnetic Vision (+20% to Land Navigation, Motion Detection), Reinforced Knuckles for both hands and a Serrated Whip that spools from the back of the right hand gauntlet.

Combat Bonuses: +2 to Pull Punch, +1 to Strike and +1D6 to damage with sword and dagger.

Packmaster Armor Weapons:

1. Packmaster's Bio-Sabers (2): One is mounted in a housing in the left forearm, while the other Saber is a handheld weapon.

2. Burner.

3. Light Cell Laser Pistol: Upgraded with Target Sight.

London's Pack

London's Gore Pack has all the unity and functionality that most Packmasters desire. They are well-rounded trackers, recon and certainly exceptional fighters, and operate like a well-oiled machine when it comes to serving their Packmaster. Individually they may be a tad more aggressive and rambunctious; but when they are working alongside one another with a focused task, they

are silent predators that are keen on the hunt, whatever the task may be. However, with that being said, London has often found herself and her pack being assigned the task of pursuit, interceptors and hunters of Machines, Alien Predators and rival Splicers. It is something that her pack seems particularly adept at doing.

Rowan

Breed derivative: Pit Bull Terrier.

Description: Rowan is a well-sculpted, muscular Gorehound built like a thoroughbred gladiator canine. Rowan's armor is a dark brindle and white, with a white stripe on his muzzle that rises to the crest of his massive head, a large patch of white that dresses his chest and underbelly, and his massive front paws have white mitts. The rest of his armored hide is brown, which helps him to blend into his surroundings, particularly in forested or jungle areas, sewer systems, caverns and at night. Rowan seeks to please his Packmaster with a zeal that makes him easily trainable despite his relentlessness, he just needs to be appointed a task to keep him focused. Rowan is London's reliable enforcer and he enjoys biting and shaking Machines savagely, shredding them to pieces with his tail wagging; often wildly and unfortunately scattering metal shrapnel all over the place in the process. He has a bad tendency to be very prey driven when it comes to Alien Predators, and unfortunately towards other War Mounts when bored. Rowan will seek to assert his dominance towards other Gorehounds, even when they are not part of London's pack, which has erupted into several serious fights among Packmasters and their packs. Fortunately, London has enough control to call him off, but Rowan is always itching to scrap if he is not chewing up Machines, and requires London's firm handling or an appointed task to keep him occupied. It is Rowan's unquestionable loyalty and gameness that presses him to the top of the pack.

Pack rank: Alpha.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Height: 4 feet, 6 inches (1.4 m) at the shoulder, 6 feet, 2 inches (1.8 m) to the top of the head.

Weight: 510 pounds (231 kg) of solid muscle.

Width: 3 feet, 5 inches (1 m) shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 8 feet (2.4 m) from tip of the nose to the rump, plus a 4 foot (1.2 m) tail.

Age: 4 years.

Speed: 100 mph (160 km).

Features: Suction Cups and Gripping Hairs on all paws, Advanced Eyes, Reinforced Exoskeleton (+30 M.D.C. to main body and +7 to all other locations), Enhanced Regeneration, Resistance to Kinetic Energy/ Attacks and Saber Teeth (+4D8 to bite damage).

Skills of Note: Trust/Intimidate, Charm/Impress.

Known Weapons:

1. Shoulder-Mounted Organic Rockets (4 per shoulder).

2. Bio-Energy Expulsion Vent mounted down the center of the head and can blast enemies while biting them.

Royce

Breed derivative: Staffordshire Terrier

Description: Royce is a well-muscled, yet sleeker version of Rowan, with a contrasting disposition. Royce is the calm, more cool-headed Gorehound of the pack that is extremely protective over her Packmaster, and any others that she feels belongs to her

platoon. Royce views platoon members as close, extended members of her pack and will go above and beyond to protect them and to keep them safe, sometimes even being the peacemaker. Because of Rowan's dominance and aggressive prey drive, Royce has had to come to his aid several times. Royce never starts the fight with other War Mounts or enemies unless commanded, but it is typically her that finishes the fights once they are started.

Pack rank: Beta (possibly usurping to Alpha status).

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Attributes: I.Q. 8, M.E. 11, M.A. 21, P.S. 24, P.P. 16, P.E. 18, P.B. 17, Spd 110.

Number of Attacks: 5.

Height: 4 feet, 5 inches (1.3 m) at the shoulder, 6 feet (1.8 m) to the top of the head.

Weight: 500 pounds (225 kg).

Width: 3 feet (0.9 m) shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 8 feet (2.4 m) from tip of the nose to the rump, plus a 4 foot (1.2 m) tail.

Age: 4 years.

Speed: 100 mph (160 km).

Features: Enhanced Sight, Acid Blood, Reinforced Exoskeleton, Regeneration: Enhanced.

Skills of Note: Trust/Intimidate.

Known Weapons:

1. Right shoulder-mounted Heat Projector Cannon with Omni upgrade.

Rocky

Breed derivative: English Bull Terrier.

Description: Rocky is an elegant looking cavalier of a Gorehound, with fawn and white markings resembling the pit bull in musculature and build. However, his head has an oval shape that makes him look somewhat comical, which often disguises his fierce tenacity and raw power when he is locked in combat. Rocky is built like an armored tank and with a low center of gravity, fueling his robust musculature. Despite being the shortest Gorehound in London's pack, he is also the heaviest and enjoys serving as the pack's lead charger, often absorbing the brunt of the force and attacks from the opposition while the other Gorehounds strike; enabling London to deliver the killing blow. For Rocky, it's all in a day's work, and the aftermath of Bio-Regeneration, and the occasional healing from a Saint or Engineer if available, is simply part of his tough job. Rocky is relentless and highly insensitive to pain, and the more damage that he receives, the more he fights back to return the favor.

Only Rocky's clown-like nature supercedes his determination, as he simply enjoys playing and being silly when not given a task. Rocky likes to roughhouse with everyone, and that means literally everyone. From sleeping, cranky Roughnecks to the largest War Mounts, Rocky is always looking for a good wrestling match. Unfortunately, if someone doesn't intervene, things often get out of control as Rocky doesn't know how to back down. For Rocky, it's all a game and he desperately wants to win. Natasha keeps a good eye on him, because it is usually Rocky that stirs up the most trouble despite Rowan's aggression, and it is Rocky that has gotten London cleaning the corral pens within the haven far more than Rowan ever could.

Pack rank: Charlie.

Alignment: Principled.

Attributes: I.Q. 6, M.E. 10, M.A. 21, P.S. 22, P.P. 18, P.E. 23, P.B. 14, Spd 110.

Number of Attacks: 5.

Height: 4 feet, 3 inches (1.3 m) at the shoulder, 5 feet, 7 inches (1.7 m) at the top of the head.

Weight: 580 pounds (261 kg).

Width: 3 feet, 5 inches (1 m) shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 7 feet, 5 inches (2.2 m) from tip of the nose to the rump, plus a 2 feet, 6 inch long (0.7 m) tail.

Age: 3 years.

Speed: 100 mph (160 km).

Features: Standard Gorehound War Mount, plus Reinforced Exoskeleton (+30 M.D.C.), Regeneration: Enhanced (1D6 M.D.C. per minute (or 6D6x10 M.D.C. per hour) for main body and 1D6x10 M.D.C. per hour for all other locations, Bio-Force Field (170 M.D.C.), Increased M.D.C. (+40 M.D.C. and +30 pounds/13.5 kg), Horned Defense (attackers rolling 12 or less cut or injure themselves, 2D10 M.D.; running/body block inflicts an additional 2D6 M.D.).

Skills of Note: Charm/Impress.

Known Weapons:

1. Electrical Discharger.

Blazer

Blazer is solid jet black with iridescent, blue stripes throughout his armor and blue and white trimming along his sides that make him look like a high-performance racing machine, like the fusion of a dragon and a racing canine. He is massive in height, yet sleek and well-sculpted in pure, lean muscle and built for hyper-speed combat. His head and neck are streamlined and massive, resembling a Doberman with blade-like ears rather than a thinner Greyhound. Blazer has keen eyes that sift through his surroundings as he is prowling or running, automatically scouring, searching, locking onto and tracking anything that moves with his built-in motion detection. It is as if he is more machine than creature. Blazer is always serious business because he is the fastest, and he serves the pack as scout and point, making him the first to engage any threat. He serves London as the scout and performs with precision and efficiency that is unseen in most Gorehounds. When Blazer is engaging enemies, he will utilize his speed and quick darting and jumping to close the distance while firing his Bio-Energy Expulsion Vents to strike at opponents. Once in close proximity, he will use his Electrical Discharger to shock and stun them, thus disabling or stunning the opponent and giving the rest of the pack enough time to join the fray. Blazer will then seek to target the next adversary to soften them up for the pack and so on. If there are no other adversaries, then Blazer will continue fighting with the same opponent using strafe attacks and hit and run tactics.

Pack rank: Delta.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Attributes: I.Q. 6, M.E. 10, M.A. 21, P.S. 22, P.P. 18, P.E. 23, P.B. 14, Spd 138.

Number of Attacks: 5.

Height: 5 feet, 6 inches (1.7 m) at the shoulder, 6 feet, 8 inches (2 m) at the top of the head.

Weight: 500 pounds (225 kg).

Width: 3 feet, 6 inches (1 m) shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 8 feet (2.4 m) from the tip of the nose to the rump, plus a 4 foot (1.2 m) tail.

Age: 2 years.

Speed: 140 mph (224 km), with Speed Burst (double speed for 3D4 melees).

Features: Motion Detection, Elongated Running Legs (+20 mph/32 km), Enhanced Speed x5 (+25 mph/40 km) and Leaping Legs.

Known Weapons:

1. Shoulder-mounted Bio-Energy Expulsion Vents (2): One per shoulder.
2. Lightning Discharger.

Hinks

Breed derivative: Hinks Bull Terrier.

Description: Hinks is a solid white, English Bull Terrier Gorehound, resembling a solid white pit bull with a black nose and black eyes and is based on the original Bull and Terrier bred before the development of the oval-shaped head. Hinks reminds London so much of the father figure that would come and visit her; that she couldn't deny naming this Gorehound any other name but one to honor him. Hinks exudes the versatility and original purpose of designing and using Gorehounds. When he is around people and the area is considered safe, he is solid white, but when he is going into the field or getting ready to engage, he shifts into the chameleon patterns and it is all serious business from there. He is still learning to adjust to Natasha's moods and various orders, but he is having more of a tough time adapting and tolerating Rowan's dominance. Still maturing, Hinks learns from the pack as much as he can and is very close to Royce, who steps in when Rowan and Rocky get too rough with him.

Pack rank: Omega.

Alignment: Aberrant.

Attributes: I.Q. 6, M.E. 8, M.A. 22, P.S. 19, P.P. 17, P.E. 20, P.B. 14, Spd 138.

Number of Attacks: 5.

Height: 4 feet, 5 inches (1.3 m) at the shoulder, 6 feet (1.8 m) to the top of the head.

Weight: 500 pounds (225 kg).

Width: 3 feet (0.9 m) shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 7 feet, 5 inches (2.2 m) from the tip of the nose to the rump, plus a 3 foot (0.9 m) tail.

Age: 2 years.

Speed: 120 mph (192 km).

Skills of Note: Hunting and Trust/Intimidate.

Features: Elongated Running Legs (+20 mph/32 km), Reinforced Exoskeleton, Chameleon Skin and Medium Fangs (+2D8 M.D. added to bite damage).

Known Weapons:

1. Electrical Discharger.
2. Combat Tail.

Packmaster Drunilla "Dru" Azurtha

Unlike most Splicers who were born into the harsh world, Drunilla was born into the well-protected haven of Barren Marsh and more fortunate for her, she was born the first daughter to Dreadguard Senator, Valerie Azurtha. Dru, as she has been nicknamed, grew up in a very loving household, as her parents did their best to help her find her own path in this world. They arranged a trip for their ten year old daughter to the Barracks, the Armory, the Corrals, the Academies and to a Gene Pool where she met the an-

gelic Engineer, Christine. Dru's parents wanted her to see all the choices she could make in regards to deciding how she could one day contribute to humanity. While at the Corral, Dru was captivated with the array of War Mounts and she was awestruck at the feats they could perform. Valerie enjoyed seeing the sparkle in her daughter's eyes and how she lit up with excitement every time she saw the War Mounts. The Senator found peace in her daughter's eyes and smile when they visited the Corrals and for that moment, the other concerns of the world had disappeared from the heart of the Dreadguard. One day Dru slipped and fell into the pens as several Grendels were roughhousing each other over some meat. Dru was almost torn to pieces, had it not been for the fast, natural reactions of a Gorehound that charged into the flurry of Grendels, knocking one over and scooping Dru up in its maw. The deep growl that uttered through the teeth of the Gorehound as it stared at the Grendels, causing them to immediately drop the meat and back away from Dru, had won her heart over. The Gorehound slowly walked up to the wall with Dru safely in its maw and returned her back to her mother before being called by its Packmaster.

Six years later, Dru returned to the majestic Engineer with fervor and awe as she was acquiring her own pack. It was the happiest day of her life. Unfortunately, it was also the beginning of her being exposed to the harsh reality that Splicers lived as her mother was reassigned to the Great House of Deluvane. The relocation and pilgrimage forced Dru to experience the harsh surface conditions, various attacks from the Machine, new alien predators and the dire habitats that resided outside of the protected borders of Barren Marsh. The conveniences of Great Barren Marsh were a far cry from what Deluvane started with, and Dru was forced to adapt to a new, deadly form of living and survival as she was deeply hurt with the passing of both her parents while she was out on recon for House Deluvane.

Drunilla is cunning and unpredictable; favoring to think outside the box. Where others zig, she zags. A true oddball, she would much rather spend time with Gorehounds than with humans.

Dru is often heard talking to her pack, with pauses as if they are responding to her. A quick thinker, she will take in a situation, come up with the best (to her) plan and then execute it.

Race: Human.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Attributes: I.Q. 22, M.E. 12, M.A. 27, P.S. 12, P.P. 12, P.E. 13, P.B. 15, Spd 23.

Experience Level: 2nd level Packmaster.

Hit Points: 21. **S.D.C.:** 35 (includes all skill bonuses)

Weight: 155 pounds (70 kg), **Height:** 5 feet, 10 inches (1.5 m).

Age: 19. **Sex:** Female.

Skills of Note: Surveillance (48%), Camouflage (38%), Intelligence (42%), Operate Bio-Equipment (53%), Detect Ambush (43%), Detect Concealment (43%), Art (43%), Language and Literacy (90%), Cooking (48%) and Fencing (+1D6 damage with swords).

Combat Training: Hand to Hand: Expert.

Attacker per Melee: 4.

Combat Bonuses: +2 to Pull Punch, +1 to Strike and +1D6 to damage with sword and dagger, +2 to Roll with punch, fall or impact. +1 to initiative, +1 to parry and dodge, +2 to save vs Horror Factor and Bio-Comm installed.

Weapons of Note: Azurtha's swords have solid black blades with a blue vein going down the middle.

Special Notes: Specialized training with a Bola.

Dru's Packmaster Armor

Her Living Armor is a pale blue in the throat, chest and underbelly (slightly darker than her hair), with black and red highlights.

Base M.D.C. by Location: Arms (2): 74 each, Legs(2): 74 each, Shoulder/Neck: 55, Collar: 4, **Helmet: 70, and ***Main Body: 122.

Statistical Data:

Senses & Features: 2 Eye Stalks equipped with Advanced Eyes, One Eye Stalk has Nightvision, the other has Enhanced Sight, and one central Antenna mounted on the helmet. Sensitivity Whiskers mounted on the helmet and Enhanced Leap (5 feet/1.5 m).

Combat Bonuses: +2 to Pull Punch, +1 to Strike and +1D6 to damage with sword and dagger.

Weapons:

1. Bio-Energy Expulsion Vent: mounted on Right forearm.
2. (2) Bio-Swords.

Dru's Pack

Drunilla's Gorehounds are truly her heart and soul and any Splicer that attacks or brings harm to them has garnered an enemy for life. The Gore Pack serves her well and she views them more than her pack... she views them each as her family. Jin functions as the Alpha and the domineering tank of the pack and rarely leaves Drunilla's side. On the few occasions Jin is commanded to leave or to go assist Raye and Blue, she will do so with devotion, but as soon as her task is done she will race back to her Packmaster. Raye and Blue are far more independent and act as Dru's roving eyes and ears.

Jin

Breed derivative: Bouvier de Flandres.

Description: Jin is a massive, solidly built Gorehound, covered in solid shadow black with a massive chest built like a ram-prow and a broad head and muzzle with pulverizing jaws that have shredded many Machines. Jin's legs are robust and help serve as powerful weights when she is slamming her weight around. Jin is a no-nonsense sort of Gorehound and can be guilty of being over-protective of Dru.

Pack rank: Alpha Female.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Attributes: I.Q. 8, M.E. 11, M.A. 21, P.S. 24, P.P. 16, P.E. 18, P.B. 17, Spd 110.

Height: 4 feet, 6 inches (1.4 m) to the shoulder, 6 feet, 2 inches (1.9 m) at the top of the head.

Weight: 500 lbs (225 kg).

Width: 3 feet (0.9 m) shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 8 feet (2.4 m) from the tip of the nose to the rump, plus a 1 foot (0.3 m) docked tail.

Age: 3 years.

Speed: 100 mph (160 km).

Features: Standard Gorehound War Mount. plus Advanced Eyes, Nightvision, Advanced Senses, Sight Transmission, Regeneration: Basic, Regeneration: Enhanced, Resistance to Physi-

cal Attacks, Reinforced Body (chest is a ram-prow), Protector Skill Package (see **The Rifter® #59**).

Skills of Note: Trust/Intimidate, Charm/Impress.

Raye

Description: Raye is a muscular, yet streamlined Gorehound with no ancient Breed aesthetic. Her armored hide is solid black with a white chest shield plate and a white mitt on her left front paw. Raye enjoys licking the faces of her fellow platoon-mates, often to the point that she has found herself tongue kissing an unwary Splicer. Raye seems to enjoy the reaction and shock that the Splicers have when they realize that she has just licked them inside their mouths. Her puppy like antics often help her get out of any trouble.

Pack rank: Beta Female.

Alignment: Aberrant.

Attributes: I.Q. 6, M.E. 12, M.A. 19, P.S. 22, P.P. 18, P.E. 17, P.B. 16, Spd 110.

Height: 4 feet (1.2 m) at the shoulder, 6 feet (1.8 m) at the top of the head.

Weight: 400 lbs (180 kg).

Width: 3 feet, 5 inches (1 m) from shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 7 feet (2.1 m) from the tip of the nose to the rump, plus a 3 foot (0.9 m) tail.

Age: 3 years.

Speed: 100 mph (160 km).

Features: Standard Gorehound War Mount, plus Advanced Eyes, Nightvision, Advanced Senses, Sight Transmission, Regeneration: Basic, Regeneration: Enhanced and Trench Foot Mines (one on each lower leg).

Skills of Note: Trust/Intimidate, Charm/Impress.

Blue

Description: Blue is a firmly built, yet sleek and built for speed Gorehound with no ancient Breed aesthetic. Blue's armored hide is solid black with a white chest shield plate and a white sleeve on her right front leg. Blue is a twin litter mate to Raye, born first from an anomaly (only 2% chance) not often seen within Gene Pools. There is a noted bond between Blue and Raye that allows them to work seamlessly and cohesively as a team, even more so than standard Gorehound packmates (+2 to strike and +1 to parry melee attacks) when they are working together.

Pack rank: Omega.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Attributes: I.Q. 5, M.E. 14, M.A. 18, P.S. 21, P.P. 18, P.E. 23, P.B. 16, Spd 138.

Height: 4.5 (1.3 m) at the shoulder, 6 feet (1.8 m) to the top of the head.

Weight: 400 pounds (180 kg).

Width: 3 feet (0.9 m) shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 7 feet (2.1 m) from the tip of the nose to the rump, plus a 3 foot (0.9 m) Hammer tail.

Age: 3 years.

Speed: 120 mph (192 km).

Features: Standard Gorehound War Mount, plus Advanced Eyes, Nightvision, Advanced Senses, Sight Transmission, Regeneration: Basic, Regeneration: Enhanced, Elongated Legs (double the speed for up to 3D4 melees) and Bio-Energy Expul-

sion Vent mounted on the top of her head that fires in sync with or in alternating pulses from her blue optic visor.

Special Feature: Blue is named after her namesake for she does not have typical Gorehound eyes. Instead she has a sleek, sinister looking visor that is a deep, crystal blue sapphire color from which she can fire icy blue Bio-Energy Blasts. However, when she fires the visor blast she is temporarily blinded for 1 melee action from the residual glare. The visor can fire simultaneously or in synchronized oscillating pulses with the head-mounted Bio-Energy Expulsion Vent. This visor was gifted to Blue by request of Dru's mother as a reminder of the sparkle in Dru's eyes despite the dreaded world around her.

Skills of Note: Trust/Intimidate, Charm/Impress.

Guthrum Reigns

Guthrum was recruited into the Resistance shortly after his Norse inspired Retro-Village was overwhelmed and inevitably destroyed by a roving, homicidal group of wasteland Marauders. Having vowed to never be outmatched again, Guthrum traveled to the Barren Marsh where he was recruited into the Outrider program. Bonding with his Host Armor, "Avalanche" and his Behemoth, "Mjöltnir," Guthrum was amazed at how much thundering power could be combined between a Host Armor and a War Mount. Guthrum was convinced that there wasn't anything better nor more powerful than the Resistance could forge. Guthrum was awed by the Behemoth he beheld and wanted to study the War Mount's capabilities and limits comprehensively. He has pushed the very limits of his Mjöltnir like no other Behemoth Outrider without being abusive, foolishly reckless or costing his War Mount's life. Guthrum's impressive field prowess and tactics didn't go unnoticed and he was assigned as an Outrider Trainer to help develop the "Outrider Core." The Outrider Core is an elite special training camp conducted at the Great House of Barren Marsh where only the best of the best War Mount pilots within the Resistance are sent to train and hone their skills. Guthrum Reigns is making a reputable name for himself among the Resistance ground forces, particularly Outriders, and is seeking to build an elite regiment of Outriders called the "Vanguard." Guthrum wants to lead a massive force of War Mounts against the next targeted Computer Core and is looking to utilize the Vanguard so that they can repeat the victory that the Barren Marsh has enjoyed. Guthrum is very stubborn, humorous and boisterous when not in combat, but is even louder and extremely competitive in combat. Despite his unruly behavior at times, Guthrum is a very noble, trustworthy warrior that seeks to do the most for his team. Guthrum has suffered many head concussions in combat and typically has to be ordered to visit a Saint or Engineer for treatments as he is simply too stubborn to seek or ask for help.

Attributes: I.Q. 13, M.E. 14, M.A. 14, P.S. 26, P.P. 17, P.E. 23, P.B. 12, Spd 14.

Alignment: Unprincipled.

Hit Points: 48, **S.D.C.:** 52.

Height: 6 feet, 4 inches (1.9 m). **Weight:** 224 pounds (101 kg).

Experience Level: 7th level Outrider.

Skills of Note: Basic Military, War Mount Rider, Cowboy and Weapons Training (includes W.P. Blunt, W.P. Sword, W.P. Reverse Stroke and W.P. Siege Weapons) Programs.

Combat Training: Hand to Hand: Expert, Wrestling, W.P. Blunt (+3 strike, +3 parry, +1 thrown), W.P. Sword (+3 strike, +3

parry, +1 thrown), W.P. Siege Weapons (+2 strike) and W.P. Paired.

Attacks per Melee: 5 /6*/7**

Combat Bonuses: +1/+1*/+4** initiative, +3/+1*/+4** strike, +1** strike with long-range attacks, +4/+3*/+3** parry, +3/+2*/+3** dodge, +2 disarm, +3/+4*/+2** roll with punch/fall/impact, +3 pull punch, Karate Punch, Karate Kick, Critical Strike on a natural roll of 18, 19, or 20.

* Additional bonus from Host Armor, Avalanche.

** Additional bonus from his personal War Mount, Mjöltnir.

Avalanche Host Armor

Avalanche's head and neck resembles a broad polar bear (without the formidable canines), with a hulking, grizzly bear-like body. Massive Casting Cannons are mounted on each shoulder. Super Light Cells adorn each forearm where Guthrum can raise his arms as if each arm was holding a shield and is able to aim and fire the Super Light Cell beams at enemy targets.

Statistical Data:

Height: 8 feet (2.4 m). Guthrum's actual head is located in Avalanche's helmet chamber in the upper chest.

Width: 5 feet (1.5 m) from shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 3 feet (0.9 m), 6 feet (1.8 m) including the length of the shoulder-mounted Casting Cannons.

Weight: 750 pounds (338 kg), including Guthrum's weight.

Physical Strength: 35 Splicer Strength (equivalent to Robot).

Horror Factor: 7 for humans, none against Machines.

Host Armor Features: Standard, plus Lithovore Metabolism, Radar, Seismic Senses, x2 Enhanced Physical Strength (Guthrum's P.S.: 35) and Hands: Armored Skin.

Known Weapons:

1. Dual Shoulder-Mounted Casting Cannons (2): Damage: 3D6+6 M.D./1D8x10+16 M.D., Range: 2,800 feet (853 m).

2. Lightning Discharger: Damage: 4D12 M.D., Range: 10 feet (3 m).

3. Super Light Cells (4): Damage: up to 4D10 M.D., Range: 1,000 feet (305 m).

Mjöltnir

Mjöltnir is a formidable, loyal Behemoth War Mount that is fond of humans and protecting his Outrider. Mjöltnir is so full of testosterone that it fuels his temper. He has very little patience for being tested and he detests the presence of deadly predators within a 10 foot (3 m) proximity. Carnivore Host Armors and other War Mounts have been subjected to rough pushing and shoving and the occasional ramming or mock charging when they get too close. He will utilize his built-in Light Cell eye beams to fire upon adversaries that are too close to engage with his ranged weapons. The great Behemoth has cleverly learned to use his super light cell blasts to guide unwary enemies into traps.

Attributes of Note: P.S. 40 (Supernatural), P.E. 23. All other attributes are average.

Class: Troop Support/Tank.

Crew: One Rider.

Level: 7.

M.D.C. of Note: Main Body: 790, Head: 427. All other locations are standard Behemoth War Mount plus an additional 37 M.D.C.

Equivalent (instinctive) Skills of Note: Begging 70%, Climb 55%/40%, Herding 65%, Identify Plants & Fruits 90%, Land Navigation 78%, Prowl 36%, Swim 75% and understands the Native Language of its Great House 70%.

War Mount Features of Note: Standard, plus: Radar, Armored Head Crest, Bio-Force Field (150 M.D.C.), Horned Defense and Reinforced Exoskeleton.

Known Weapons:

1. **Casting Gun Cannons** (6) – Damage: 1D8x10+30 per individual round fired, Range: 11,000 feet (3,353 m).

2. **Organic Rocks** (32) – Damage: 5D10 M.D., Range: 1 mile (1.6 km), Rate of Fire: 1 at a time or volleys of 2, 4, 6 or 8.

3. **Super Light Cells** (4) – Damage: up to 4D10 M.D., Range: 1,000 feet (305 m).

4. **Large Tusks** – Damage: +4D8 M.D. added to 2D4 M.D. bite.

November Lexington

The Outrider known as “November” is not the most outgoing individual. She is more of a soft-spoken loner with a sweet heart that has bottled up so much pain that she emotionally scrutinizes everything around herself to avoid building emotional ties or attachments. November keeps to herself and speaks very little to those not within her social circle. Those who are closest to her call her “Lexy” and they accept that she means well despite her irritating shyness. Her friends know that her shyness stems from horrific experiences that November is still getting over. November and her haven sweetheart, Ramus Lexington, joined the Roughneck Infantry the same day and trained together religiously. They soon married and served as part of the haven’s Guardians. An Infiltrator Robot disguised as a wounded woman managed to get past House Deluvane’s security perimeter and immediately engaged the base defenders. Ramus fought valiantly until his dying breath in order to allow as many civilians as possible to escape the carnage. November was fighting by his side, but she was dragged off by her Roughneck comrades as she wanted to pursue the Infiltrator into the dark, twisted catacombs where the advantage easily shifts to the Infiltrator. The Infiltrator was inevitably located and hunted down by the haven Marshals and Scarecrows, but the carnage and bloodshed haunts many Deluvane citizens till this day. November went into a deep depression but was forced to continue to serve in the Roughneck Infantry.

Later in the year, November’s face was horribly burned when she encountered a large piece of what was some sort of ancient vehicle loosely covered in dirt. She barely escaped the ensuing Nano-plague response. Her face has been physically healed, but her emotional scars and nightmares since the horrific attack have made her insecure about not having enough protection against metal objects. Not only does November quickly seek to upgrade her coveted Host Armor, “Cygnus Rain,” with every opportunity she gets, Lexington has also walked away from being in the Roughneck Infantry and became a Behemoth Outrider. Now with her massive puppy that she named Bronx, she is passionate about giving the Machines some retribution.

Attributes: I.Q. 12, M.E. 12, M.A. 9, P.S. 19, P.P. 17, P.E. 18, P.B. 18, Spd 27.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Hit Points: 37. **S.D.C.:** 34.

Height: 5 feet, 4 inches (1.6 m). **Weight:** 116 pounds (52 kg).

Experience Level: 4th level Outrider.

Skills of Note: Basic Military, War Mount Rider, Bio-Technology and Infantryman Programs.

Combat Training: Hand to Hand: Expert, W.P. Bio-Weapons: Light (+2 strike).

Attacks per Melee: 5/+1*/+2**.

Combat Bonuses: +1/+1*/+4** initiative, +3/+1*/+4** strike, +1** strike with long-range attacks, +4/+2*/+3** parry, +3/+1*/+3** dodge, +2 disarm, +2/+2*/+2** roll with punch/fall/impact, +4/+1* pull punch.

* Additional bonus from Host Armor, Cygnus.

** Additional bonus from her personal War Mount, Bronx.

Cygnus Rain Host Armor

Cygnus Rain resembles a beautiful yet stocky, solid white eagle with a swan-like head, sleek black visor for eyes, and a bright yellow-orange raptor beak. The beak is filled with a row of small serrated teeth for feeding and the rest of the body is insect-like with iridescent hues of emerald and blue. Rain has a massive Bore cannon mounted on the right shoulder and a serrated Forearm Bone blade on her right forearm. A series of Flying Blades are concealed and housed throughout her shoulders and left forearm.

Statistical Data:

Height: 6 feet, 6 inches (2 m). November’s head is located in Cygnus Rain’s helmet chamber in the upper chest.

Width: 3 feet (0.9 m) shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 3 feet (0.9 m), 4 feet (1.2 m) including the length of the shoulder-mounted Bore Cannon.

Weight: 475 pounds (214 kg), including November’s weight.

Physical Strength: 35 Splicer Strength (equivalent to Robot).

Horror Factor: 7 for humans, none against Machines.

Host Armor Features: Standard, plus Omnivore Metabolism, Radar, Seismic Senses, x2 Enhanced Physical Strength (Cygnus’ P.S.: 35) and Hands: Armored Skin.

Known Weapons:

1. **Mega-Omni Bore Cannon:** Damage: 6D10 M.D. initially and 2D10+6 M.D. for 1D6 rounds, Range: 4,000 feet (1,219 m).

2. **Flying Blades (8):** Damage: 1D4 M.D. per blade, Range: 30 feet (9.1 m).

3. **Forearm Bone Blade:** Damage: 4D6 M.D.

Bronx

Bronx is a playful, yet rowdy Behemoth that is still learning his ropes in the field. He adores his November and likes to get her attention and approval. When engaged in combat and not interfaced with November, Bronx can prove to be very feisty and stubborn. He refuses to back down or retreat from a threat, no matter the numbers opposing him. November is the only force that he fears, and he will always return to his puppy-like mindset when it comes to her affection. However, if November is threatened, he becomes a fierce storm to reckon with.

Attributes of Note: I.Q. 6, M.A. 16. All other attributes are average.

M.D.C. of Note: Main Body: 880, Head: 320, All other locations have an additional 37 M.D.C.

Equivalent (instinctive) Skills of Note: Begging 70%, Climb 55%/40%, Herding 65%, Identify Plants & Fruits 90%, Land Navigation 78%, Prowl 11%, Swim 50% and understands the Native Language of its Great House 70%.

War Mount Features of Note: Standard, plus Nightvision Eyes, Seismic Senses, x5 Increased M.D.C. (+150 lbs/67.5 kg, +200 M.D.C.), Regeneration: Enhanced (1D6 M.D.C. per minute) and Resistance to Heat.

Known Weapons:

1. Opti-Casting Gun Cannons* (6): Damage: 1D8x10+30 per individual round fired, Range: 11,000 feet (3,353 m), reduce Critical Strike number by -1; i.e.: normal Critical Strike of 18-20 now becomes 17-20. (*See **The Rifter® #50** for the Opti upgrade.)

2. Organic Rocks (32): Damage: 5D10 M.D., Range: 1 mile (1.6 km), Rate of Fire: 1 at a time or volleys of 2, 4, 6 or 8.

3. Heat Projector Cannon: Damage: 5D8 M.D. for a light blast or 1D8x10+10 for a heavy blast. Range: 1,800 feet (549 m).

Val Skyeborn

As a child, Val enjoyed looking up at the stars. He would dream of flying in the sky and soaring with the birds and starships of the Golden Age. One day, when he was 12 years old, he saw multiple large shadows overhead. The shadows turned out to be a flight of Dracos heading off to another front in the war against the forces of N.E.X.U.S. He ran in the direction they flew and found that they had landed not too far away. Val marveled at their power, their designs, their morphology and their ability to rule the skies. Ever since that day, he decided that despite his initial desire to become an Archangel, he would join the Resistance to one day fly the ultimate predator of the skies and be able to reclaim the heavens. Val Skyeborn has a deep passion for flying that seems abnormal, and borderline compulsive. He has flown with wing packs and flown on a Zephyr War Mounts, but nothing overrides his dreams of piloting the legendary Dracos.

Val has worked hard to become a Dracos Outrider and enjoys every minute that he can take to fly his beautiful Dracos, “Tempest Ariel.” Val tends to get upset upon occasion because he is limited as to how much flight time he can enjoy with Tempest due to the swarming patrols of Machines that roam the land and how quickly they can alert the orbiting Sky Fighters that patrol the skies. However, it is the need for saving his fellow soldiers and seeking to restore the human race that pushes Val beyond his own ideals and needs. Val is a rare type of pure-hearted hero who doesn’t seek some favored housing within haven society, nor heroic fame and accolades for deeds that he has done. He doesn’t seek rank or a seat in the high Senate. Val only seeks to reclaim the planet from the Machine and to see peace restored to the survivors of this world. Val fights to acknowledge and accept that it is not just the Machine that threatens his belief in ultimate peace. He tries to see the good in everyone, even when they don’t or refuse to see it in themselves. Val has learned the precious value of life, and will only kill another human being as a last resort. However, Val’s respect for life doesn’t stop him from seriously wounding or crippling rival Splicers or disabling Wastecrawlers when given the chance; he simply abhors the killing of his own fellow man.

Attributes: I.Q. 12, M.E. 12, M.A. 11, P.S. 19, P.P. 26, P.E. 15, P.B. 17, Spd 17.

Alignment: Principled.

Hit Points: 40. **S.D.C.:** 34.

Height: 5 feet, 7 inches (2.1 m). **Weight:** 152 pounds (68 kg).

Experience Level: 5th level Outrider.

Skills of Note: Basic Military, War Mount Rider, Bio-Technology and Language Specialist (Bartering, Sign Language, Speak Japanese and Russian, Literacy: Japanese and Russian) programs.

Combat Training: Hand to Hand: Basic, W.P. Sword (+2 strike, +2 parry, +1 thrown), W.P. Knife (+2 strike, +2 parry, +2 thrown).

Attacks per Melee: 5/ 6*/ 7**.

Combat Bonuses: +4*/+4** initiative, +7/+3*/+4** strike, +1** strike with long-range attacks, +8/+2*/+3** parry, +8/+2*/+3** dodge, +12* auto-dodge, +1/+1* disarm, +2/+5*/+2** roll with punch/fall/impact, +2/+1* pull punch.

* Additional bonus from Host Armor, Orion.

** Additional bonus from her personal War Mount, Tempest Ariel.

Orion Host Armor

Orion is a smooth, sleek looking Host Armor that looks as if it was painted with the vacuum of space, with hints of its illustrious, colorful nebulas swirling along its shoulders and chest plates. Only the sleek, sinister, parallel slits that form along the helmet’s visor and insect-like plating help remind people that this armor is not just some beautiful imitation of space, but is actually a deadly war machine bred for battle. For Val Skyeborn, Orion is a reminder that humans have to focus and preserve hope and seek to flee this horrid planet if they can and that they may be able to survive in the vast freedom of space. Orion is Val’s personal reminder that this planet does not represent all that there is to life. Every time Val suits up, he whispers a prayer for finding a way off the planet and taking the best of mankind with him. Orion is the key that will help him accomplish this and that he has to mentally turn off Val the human and become Val the Knight in order to achieve his objectives: one day at a time, one life at a time.

Statistical Data:

Height: 6 feet, 7 inches (2 m).

Width: 3 feet (0.9 m) shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 2 feet, 6 inches (0.7 m).

Weight: 500 pounds (225 kg), including Val’s weight.

Physical Strength: 33 Splicer Strength (equivalent to Robot).

Horror Factor: 7 for humans, none against Machines.

Host Armor Features: Standard, plus Thermosynthetic Metabolism, Thermo-imaging/infrared/ultraviolet vision, Armored Eyes, Compound Eyes, Motion Detection, Radar, Resistance to Heat, Enhanced Neurological Connections, Organic Thrusters (220 mph/352 km) with a maximum altitude of 25,000 feet (7,620 m) and Righting Reflexes.

Known Weapons:

1. Forearm-Mounted Bio-Energy Expulsion Vents (2):

Damage: 2D8+15 M.D. per Vent, Range: 1,800 feet (549 m).

“Tempest Ariel” Dracos War Mount

A magnificent beast, Tempest Ariel enjoys soaring in the wide open skies of mountain ranges, above lakes and oceans. She also enjoys swimming at high-speeds through the massive bodies of water. What she doesn’t like are the annoying machines in the skies and on land that her Outrider calls robots. Tempest fights ferociously to protect the soldiers that she ushers in and out of battle and will stay in the fight to make sure that Val and the rest of the soldiers make it back home. This exotic, beautiful Dracos

is a deep violet with crimson and black markings, and exudes unbridled power fueled with a fiery heart.

Attributes of Note: I.Q. 7 P.P. 20. All other attributes are average.

M.D.C. of Note: Main Body: 880, Heads (3, heavily reinforced): 210 each.

Equivalent (instinctive) Skills of Note: Climb 55%/25%, Land Navigation 88%, Swim 45%, Track by Scent 75% and understands the Native Language of the Great House that created it.

War Mount Features of Note: Standard Dracos, plus Stealth Field.

Known Weapons:

1. Enhanced Bio-Napalm Thrower: Damage: 6D12 M.D. per each initial blast, and napalm burns for 1D4 minutes doing an additional 6D12 M.D. per melee, Range: 1,000 feet (305 m).

2. Smoky Ink Dispensers (2).

3. Head-Mounted Super Light Cells (6 – One Cell behind each eye): Damage: 1D10+5 M.D. per beam fired, up to 6D10+30. Range: 2,000 feet (610 m).

4. Needle Death Blossom: Damage: 1 M.D. to 1D12x10 M.D., Range: 30 feet (9.1 m) when fired on the ground, 300 feet (91.4 m) when fired in the air.

5. Organic Rockets (6): Damage: 5D10 M.D. each, Range: One mile (1.6 km).

Creed

As your “typical” Biotic, Creed’s story is not that much different from any other Biotic. Creed, before his conversion into a Biotic, was a sergeant attached to a company of Roughnecks and their supporting Militiamen. During one particular battle, Creed and his unit who were defending a Retro-village, were ordered to leave their post and engage N.E.X.U.S. and her forces that were assaulting friendly forces nearby. When the battle was over and Creed returned to the Retro-village, there was nothing left but burning buildings and dead bodies. No one could confirm giving Creed the order to abandon his post. There are rumors that a band of Wasteland Marauders were seen in the area of his missing band, but these are only “rumors.” Creed and his entire unit were arrested despite their passionate protests and inevitably court-martialed. Their punishment: Biotic conversion!

Creed has been reborn an indigo blue massive beast of carnage and destruction who has an insatiable drive for overkill. He is the Deluvane Librarian’s take on the Sasquatch legends of old, but even the folktales pale in comparison to the walking nightmare that is called Creed. He is extremely fast and explosive in speed and power for someone of his scale due to his thrusters and predatory musculature. He is relentless in his hunts and pursuit of quarry, and will unleash an unbridled tenacity on any adversary that he engages in combat. Creed’s body is abnormally big, even for a Biotic, and he is purposely packed with a deadly array of bio-enhancements to try and make him into the perfect living weapon.

What is becoming a rising concern is that some of Creed’s platoon partners (fellow Biotics and a few Roughnecks) who have gone into small missions have not been returning, only Creed. The Librarians who probe him know what’s truly going on and they are using him as their test subject. Creed would have possibly been culled a long time ago had it not been for his field efficiency and combative prowess against the Machines. Creed

will always try to bribe platoon mates to go out on solo trips with him to scout ahead, or to go hunt for food for the resting platoon, or to investigate some noise that he has supposedly heard where he hopefully can get anyone of lower rank or from another Great House, alone. Individuals who become apparently suspicious of Creed’s behaviors will find themselves being saved more often than usual as he tries to make them secondguess their gut instincts. If they continue to act suspicious of him and if he suspects the individual is not convinced of his acts of valor, then he will go into deceitful, sabotaging methods to try to inflict severe accidents upon them.

Any one or two individuals lured alone with Creed will learn of a new Creed to engage with as he either becomes a vicious, cannibalistic and full-blown predator (01-49%) or he becomes a playful prankster playing a game of cat and mouse or hide and seek (50-00%), lasting for up to 2D6 Actions. The Deluvane Librarian, Tesla, is fully aware of Creed’s behavior; however, Tesla is intrigued with Creed’s nature and his amazing prowess of overcoming formidable adversaries versus ceasing his deadly games.

Race: Biotic.

Attributes: I.Q. 14, M.E. 10, M.A. 12, P.S. 36, P.P. 18, P.E. 27, P.B. 11, Spd 58.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Experience Level: 6th level Biotic.

Height: 10 feet (3 m).

Weight: 1,200 pounds (540 kg).

Hit Points /M.D.C.: 305.

Age: Classified, **Sex:** Male.

Skills of Note: Domestic, Infantryman, Support Man, and Man-Hunter Skill Programs plus: Intelligence, Trap Construction, Wilderness Survival, Boxing, and W.P. Armor.

Secondary Skills: Camouflage, W.P. Sword, and Horsemanship.

Combat Training: Hand to Hand: Commando, Boxing, W.P. Sword (+3 strike, +2 parry, +1 thrown), W.P. Armor (+1D6 S.D.C./M.D.C. damage with armor) and W.P. Paired Weapons.

Attacks per Melee: 7.

Combat Bonuses: +5 Initiative, +5 strike, +7 parry, +8 dodge, +4 automatic dodge (does not cost as an attack/action to perform), +1 disarm, +1 body flip/throw, +5 roll with punch/fall/impact, +5 pull punch, +4 vs Horror Factor, +24% vs coma/death, +8 vs poisons/toxins/gases and +6 vs magic.

Biotic Body Notes: 305 M.D.C. (Main Body), Splicer P.S., Regeneration: Super 2D6+3 M.D.C. per melee, last 10 times longer before fatigue kicks in, can last 3 full days without sleep, Reinforced Exoskeleton, Super Regeneration, Adrenaline Surge, Leaping Legs (includes Elongated Legs, +28 to Spd attribute, +60 feet/18.3 m high leap, and +100 feet/30.5 m across leap), Resin Ducts, Enhanced Physical Strength x4 (+4 P.S.), and Organic Thrusters (200 mph/320 km with a maximum altitude of 25,000 feet/7,620 m).

Known Bio-Enhancements & Features: Acid Blood, Medium-sized Retractable White Claws (+2D6+6 to Splicer P.S. punch damage, total damage of 5D6+6 M.D.), Reinforced Knuckles (+1D6 M.D. to Splicer P.S. punch damage), Spiked Combat Tail (6D6 M.D.), Blue Plasma Breath (6D12 M.D., 40 feet/12.2 m, +4 strike).

Horror Factor: 9.

Insanities: Compulsive Liar and Psychotic Personality Disorder.

Living Armor: Dragon Scale Armor (238 M.D.C.), Enhanced Senses, and Nightvision. Regenerates at 4D6 M.D.C. per minute. -10% to Prowl, Climb, Swimming, Acrobatics and Gymnastics. When worn, reduce running speed by 10%.

Jesse Stansfield

Like all Scarecrows, “ugly” doesn’t begin to describe Jesse. Tall and slender, Jesse looks like a walking cadaver; thin and corpse-like, complete with pale gray skin. His voice is easily his greatest feature. When he speaks, his voice sounds like velvet, smooth and resonant. Jesse usually wears a wide, weathered cowboy brim hat and a high-collar trench coat with flaps that conceal the lower part of his face. During intense moments or the anticipation of combat, he may wear a painted, ceramic fiber facemask that looks like a wicked, smiling Scarecrow.

Jesse seldom wears armor within the confines of the Great House, but will wear it in the field, particularly when he ventures to the surface or anticipates heavy combat. Jesse has a suit of Chitinous Armor and Leatherback Armor, but neither has any additional enhancements.

Malicious, deceitful, and cool as ice. Jesse has no morality whatsoever, and will hurt, lie, cheat, and kill nearly anyone to attain his personal goals or the objectives of his Librarian master; no action is too underhanded. Power is all that matters to him. Jesse is constantly scheming and plotting and firmly believes that the end justifies the means. He is careful and cunning and always ensures that nothing can ever be traced back to him. His actions are never rash or impulsive, and he will sometimes wait months or even years before taking revenge or action against those who have opposed or angered him. Many people have made an enemy of this Scarecrow and never realized it until the tragic end. He is a masterful actor, and can portray nearly any emotion at the drop of a hat.

Jesse is clever and silver-tongued, and can usually talk people into any course of action (while making them believe it was their idea the whole time!). Jesse’s only real weakness is Sylvia. He is absolutely devoted to his protégé and will protect her with his life.

Race: Scarecrow.

Attributes: I.Q. 15, M.E. 18, M.A. 20, P.S. 31, P.P. 20, P.E. 20, P.B. 4, Spd 82.

Alignment: Miscreant.

M.D.C.: 264 + Armor.

Age: Classified.

Height: 5 feet, 8 inches (1.7 m). **Weight:** 185 pounds (83.9 kg).

Experience Level: 8th level Scarecrow.

Combat Skills: Hand to Hand: Assassin.

Attacks per Melee: 8.

Bonuses (All bonuses, including those from stats): +6 on initiative, +5 to strike, +6 to parry, +6 to dodge, +5 to auto-dodge, +2 to entangle, +3 to pull punch, +2 to roll with punch, K.O./Stun on Natural 17-20, +20 S.D.C. damage, +2 save vs mind control, +7 save vs toxic gases, poisons, drugs and disease, +5 save vs Horror Factor, +2 save vs insanity, 60% trust/intimidate, +30% vs coma/death.

Hand to Hand Damage (Supernatural Strength):

Restrained Punch: 5D6+20 S.D.C.

Full Punch: 4D6 M.D.

Power Punch: 1D4x10 M.D.

Special Abilities:

Super Endurance: Can last 10 times longer before feeling the effects of exhaustion and can remain alert and operate at full efficiency for up to 5 days without sleep.

Super Leap: Can leap 60 feet (18.2 m) across and 30 feet (9 m) high after a short run (half from a dead stop).

Super Healing: Regenerates 2D4 M.D.C. per melee round and is virtually impervious to pain; no amount of pain will impair Jesse until he is down to zero M.D.C. At this point, he will collapse into unconsciousness, but will continue to regenerate. When back up to at least 3 M.D.C. above zero, he will regain consciousness and be ready for action within 1D4 seconds (one melee action.)

Superior Senses: Crystal clear sight and hearing (can clearly read a street sign at one mile and hear a whisper at 100 feet/30.5 m). Sense of smell is a thousand times greater than an average human’s, and he can follow a scent trail that is up to two days old. The sense of smell offers the following specific abilities:

1. Identify common smells: 800 feet (243.8 m) range, 76% chance of success.

2. Identify specific odors, including specific individuals, items, or monsters: 105 foot (32 m) range, 52% chance of success (+10% if smell is familiar, +15% to follow blood scent).

3. Track by smell alone. Does not need tracks or any other visible trail. 62% chance of success.

Natural Horror Factor: Jesse is downright scary!! Horror Factor of 11.

Skills of Note: Detect Ambush, Wilderness Survival, and Interrogation at 90%, Climbing, Bio-Comms, and Literacy at 80%, Military Etiquette 85%, Intelligence 84%, Sniper, Pick Locks 70%, Surveillance 70%, Use and Recognize Poison 66%, Vital Points: Robots and Humans, Land Navigation 68%, Prowl 65%, Tracking 65%, Pick Pockets 65%, Concealment 52%, Sign Language 45%, Psychology 35%, Kick Boxing and Running.

Weapon Proficiencies: W.P. Archery, Bio-Weapons: Light, Bio-Weapons: Heavy, Knife, Paired Weapons and Whip.

Allies: Jesse’s only true allies are his Librarian and his fellow Scarecrows, especially Sylvia. Everyone else is either a pawn, a threat, or beneath his notice.

Enemies: If you are not with him, you are against him. Along with the Machine, Jesse views any who oppose him as enemies. However, Jesse prefers to work from the shadows; as a result, many people he considers enemies do not even realize they are on his bad side.

Money and Valuables: Jesse can access almost any of the resources of the Great House, subject to the Warlord’s discretion.

Weapons and Equipment: Due to his strength, Jesse will often use just his bare hands in combat. However, if anticipating heavy combat, he will carry the following:

1. **Heavy Bore Rifle with the following upgrades:** Targeting Sight with Nightvision and Ultra Upgrade.

2. **Bio-E Pistol.**

3. **Spiked Ball Tentacle Scourge.**

Game Master Notes: Jesse likes to work very close to Leon Valentino, possibly spying on him for his Librarian master. He enjoys feeding Leon’s ego to corrupt his thought processes. His

protege Scarecrow is with him, and together they are certainly performing some other agenda among this group, but whatever it is, they won't reveal it. No one from the Deluvane strike team "openly" suspects them, but there are glimpses of questionable things that the player group does catch that should make them suspicious of this Scarecrow's behavior. Jesse is romantically involved with his protege and will protect her with his life. He is also very religious about his walk in life as a Scarecrow, the mission they are on and won't take any crap from anyone not in the Deluvane Strike team. Jesse and Jinx will purposely test the player group's trust of one another without being too obvious.

Sylvia Monroe, Call Sign "Jinx"

Jesse's protege is all about studying people and observing things and trying to get as much intel from other people as she can. Unknown to anyone else but Jesse, Sylvia is serving as an experiment for the Librarian, Tesla. While the inhuman look of Scarecrows serves as a trademark of sorts, it also limits their usefulness in gathering intelligence and attracts too much undesirable attention. Sylvia is the first in a series of experiments to try and make them appear more human. Unlike most Scarecrows, Sylvia is strangely beguiling to some extent. Her skin has only the slightest pruning and discoloration expected of Scarecrows. Her face, breasts and legs have also been cosmetically augmented to look more attractive. However, her face is an oddity; the nerves and musculature don't quite align perfectly with her movements and expressions. She rarely moves her mouth much and limits her expressions to more seductive gestures that avoid smiling or frowning. The rest of her body, however, is clearly suffering from the effects of the Elixir. Unlike her field trainer, she is very flirtatious, especially if she thinks it will help garner trust or attention. Sylvia is very bold and outspoken at times and is learning to think before she speaks. Sometimes her emotional outbursts cause her trainer to intervene in order to settle things down, though deep down inside, she knows what she is doing and enjoys seeing her trainer step in to defend her.

Sylvia is very cunning at playing people against each other and likes to play the innocent person in altercations. She enjoys playing mind games and distasteful pranks, and will tease people when she gets the opportunity. She enjoys acting as if she placed some Elixir on their lips while they were sleeping, or that she saw something crawl into the deep crevice or port of a Host Armor, but it's not there anymore, just to get her laughs out of people. The problem is, she is actually crazy enough to place critters inside Armor suits when they aren't looking, so it's always best to double check. Despite her flirtations, she is completely devoted to Jesse.

Race: Scarecrow.

Attributes: I.Q. 16, M.E. 13, M.A. 19, P.S. 25, P.P. 18, P.E. 20, P.B. 7, Spd 119 mph (190 km).

Alignment: Anarchist.

Experience Level: 4th Level Scarecrow.

M.D.C.: 138 + Armor. Regenerates at 2D4 M.D.C. per melee round.

Weight: 125 pounds (56 kg), **Height:** 5 feet, 6 inches (1.7 m) tall.

Age: Classified. **Sex:** Female.

Experience Level: 4th level Scarecrow.

Combat Skills: Hand to Hand: Assassin.

Skills of Note: Demolitions, Demolitions: Underwater, and Demolitions Disposal 72%, Swimming and Detect Ambush 70%, Intelligence 68%, Detect Concealment, Disguise, Wilderness Survival 65%, Climbing, Machine Technology, Tracking, Trap and Mine Detection 60%, Machine Lore 56%, Camouflage and Chemistry 55%, Escape Artist and Public Speaking 50%, Intelligence, Interrogation, Palming, Pick Pockets and Prowl at 45%, Resist Torture.

Weapon Proficiencies: Bio-Weapons: Light, Bio-Weapons: Heavy, Knife and Paired Weapons.

Attacks per Melee: 6.

Bonuses (includes all bonuses, including those from stats): +2 on initiative, +4 to strike, +2 to parry, +2 to dodge, +5 to auto-dodge, +2 to entangle, +3 to pull punch, +2 to roll with punch, K.O./Stun on Natural 17-20, +10 S.D.C. damage, +2 save vs mind control, +7 save vs toxic gases, poisons, drugs and disease, +5 save vs Horror Factor, +2 save vs insanity, 55% trust/intimidate, +10% vs coma/death.

Hand to Hand Damage (Supernatural Strength):

Restrained Punch: 5D6+10 S.D.C.

Full Punch: 4D6 M.D.

Power Punch: 1D4x10 M.D.

Special Abilities:

Super Endurance: Can last 10 times longer before feeling the effects of exhaustion and can remain alert and operate at full efficiency for up to 5 days without sleep.

Super Leap: Can leap 60 feet (18.2 m) across and 30 feet (9 m) high after a short run (half from a dead stop).

Super Healing: Regenerates 2D4 M.D.C. per melee round and is virtually impervious to pain; no amount of pain will impair Sylvia until she is down to zero M.D.C. At this point, she will collapse into unconsciousness, but will continue to regenerate. When back up to at least 3 M.D.C. above zero, she will regain consciousness and be ready for action within 1D4 seconds (one melee attack).

Superior Senses: Crystal clear sight and hearing (can clearly read a street sign at one mile and hear a whisper at 100 feet/30.5 m). Sense of smell is a thousand times greater than an average human's, and she can follow a scent trail that is up to two days old. The sense of smell offers the following specific abilities:

1. Identify common smells: 400 foot (122 m) range, 68% chance of success.

2. Identify specific odors, including specific individuals, items, or monsters: 65 foot (20 m) range, 44% chance of success (+10% if smell is familiar, +15% to follow blood scent).

3. Track by smell alone. Does not need tracks or any other visible trail. 46% chance of success.

Natural Horror Factor: 10, though some find Sylvia bizarrely alluring.

Weapons and Equipment: Sylvia normally carries the following weapons:

1. **Heavy Bio-Energy Rifle with the following upgrades:** Targeting Sight with Mega Upgrade.

2. **Light Cell Laser Pistol with the following upgrades:** Targeting Sight with Mega Upgrade.

3. **Heavy Spiked Maul.**

Allies: Like her lover, Sylvia's only true allies are her Librarian and fellow Scarecrows. Everyone else is to be used and manipulated.

Enemies: Sylvia has adopted Jesse's attitude; if you are not with her, you are against her. Sylvia views almost everyone as a potential enemy or pawn to be used.

Money and Valuables: With Jesse's influence, Sylvia can access almost any of the resources of the Great House, subject to the Warlord's discretion.

Zhong Kui, Call Sign "Ghost"

Trained by the stealth master Skinjob of Barren Marsh named Paquette, Zhong "Ghost" Kui is a crafty Skinjob that is living up to his name as he continues to prove himself in the field. Ghost enjoys infiltrating into outposts and hideaways to scout out safe havens for his team or to spy on Machine activity. While he enjoys sabotage and infiltration, he's not fond of open combat, preferring misdirection over confrontation.

Ghost is a passionate reader, particularly of history, and will frequently use time between missions to scour old archives and records. This passion has inspired him to begin writing on his own, something he's becoming quite good at. Ghost keeps detailed records of his travels, missions, observations, strategies, and tactics. He's also begun to dabble into creative writing, using his experiences as a basis for a series of adventurous short stories. Ghost hopes that one day, his thrilling adventures will inspire the future generations of the Resistance. He imagines a time where he has long come and gone, and his writing is turned into the entertaining, informative plays that he hears are enjoyed by so many citizens within haven society. Ghost has not been to any of these plays as he is fully aware that that he is not eye candy for anyone and he dislikes it when people try to act like they aren't disturbed by his outer appearance; when he can discern their body language is conveying just the opposite. This often causes Ghost to call them out on it and has instigated undesirable arguments. Like many Skinjobs, Ghost often comes across as reclusive or antisocial. While not mean or hostile, he tends to keep to himself, only confiding in a few close friends.

Ghost's choice of War Mount is actually a massive Gorehound named "Cao" that resembles a robust Shar Pei. Cao is covered in dense wrinkles and is equipped with a stealth field. He is Ghost's personal War Mount that operates and fights alongside the Skinjob with ferocious tenacity and relentless drive. Cao's thick, wrinkled skin is so loose that it allows him to turn around in the skin even when seized or bitten by another adversary to deliver his own bite. This style of combat is something that the Ghost is trying to develop for his own form of martial arts combat style called the "Ghost Skin" technique. A keen student of history, when he is not in the field, Ghost is writing his strategies, observations, and combat notes that he hopes to teach and pass along to other fellow Skinjobs.

Race: Skinjob.

Attributes: I.Q. 17, M.E. 20, M.A. 13, P.S. 16, P.P. 14, P.E. 20, P.B. 8, Spd 22.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Experience Level: 4th Level Skinjob.

M.D.C.: 302 M.D.C. Regenerates 1D6 M.D.C. every 10 minutes or 6D6 M.D.C. per hour.

Weight: 176 pounds (79 kg), **Height:** 5 feet, 8 inches (1.7 m) tall.

Age: 22. **Sex:** Male.

Appearance: Like all Skinjobs, Ghost appears horrifying. Covered in dull grey skin speckled with repulsive white blotches,

he looks as if he's covered in diseased elephant hide. Unlike his skin, his eyes are bright and gleam with creative intelligence. His voice is as otherworldly as his appearance, low and quiet, like a ghostly whisper.

Skills of Note: Research (85%), Demolitions, Demolitions Disposal, and Demolitions: Underwater (82%), Bio-Comms, Breed Dogs, Detect Ambush, History, Machine Tech, Operate Bio-Equipment, Pick Locks, Trap and Mine Detection (75%), Machine Lore and Pick Pockets (70%), Intelligence (68%), Chemistry (65%), Wilderness Survival (60%), Climbing, Creative Writing, Cryptography, Land Navigation, Sign Language, Tracking (55%), Camouflage (50%), Recognize Weapon Quality (45%), Concealment (41%), Palming (40%), Sleight of Hand, Swimming, Athletics and Fencing.

Weapon Proficiencies: Bio-Weapons: Light, Bio-Weapons: Heavy, Archery, Blunt, Knife, Staff, Sword.

Attacks per Melee: 5.

Combat Bonuses: +1 to dodge, +2 to initiative, +1 to strike, +2 to parry and dodge, +3 to roll with punch/fall/ impact, +1 to disarm, and +3 top pull punch. +2 to save vs Horror Factor.

Other Combat Info: Backward Sweep Kick, Karate punch/ Strike does (2D4 damage) and Karate Kick does 2D6.

Senses & Features: Standard Skinjob M.D.C. Skin (impervious to Mega-Damage fire and cold, high pain resistance), Chameleon Skin, Stealth Field, Silent Prowl (special), Feign Death, reduced sense of touch.

Weapons of Note:

1. Bio-Energy Pistol.

2. Wears a Demolition Leather Harness. Pouches contain 6 Chigs (3 on each side), 4 Migs (2 on each side) and 1D4 Squigs. Anything else that Zhong anticipates he will need is placed onto Cao's harness.

3. High-frequency daggers (3).

4. Zhong has placed an Electro-Pulse Gun on the harness of Cao for metal threats (Machine, Technojacker, Nano-Plague reactions or otherwise).

Zhong's personal Gorehound, "Cao."

Breed derivative: Shar Pei.

Description: Cao is a compact, extremely muscled Gorehound, literally a massive pit bull covered in a Skinjob's skin, covered in wrinkles just like its ancient breed derivative; quite possibly even more so. When not prowling in the concealment of his Stealth Field, Cao can be seen with a harmonic vigor due to his powerful musculature which stands out, under the heavily wrinkled, elastic, Mega-Damage skin. Cao's broad head and muzzle are well designed to house the crushing jaws which are adept at pulverizing Machines and enemy armor. This is the first time that a Shar Pei Gorehound prototype has been developed and Dulavene is thrilled to see a high demand pour in for the Shar Pei DNA/RNA codes from their Alliances. Samples have been sold and new litters are being developed for other Skinjobs belonging to other Great Houses. Zhong's field success ratio being a record high with the gifted aid of his Gorehound and even overtaking rival Skinjobs, has surely boosted interest in the Shar Pei breed and Deluvane is considering the employment of Great House Artemis to help control undesirable Black Market sales and distribution.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Attributes: I.Q. 9, M.E. 8, M.A. 18, P.S. 23, P.P. 17, P.E. 21, P.B. 12, Spd 110.

Height: 4 feet, 6 inches (1.4 m) at the shoulder, 6 feet, 2 inches (1.9 m) at the top of the head.

Weight: 500 lbs (225 kg).

Width: 3 feet (0.9 m) from shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 8 feet (2.4 m) from the tip of the nose to the rump, plus a 2 foot (0.6 m), curled tail.

Age: 3.5 years.

Speed: 100 mph (160 km).

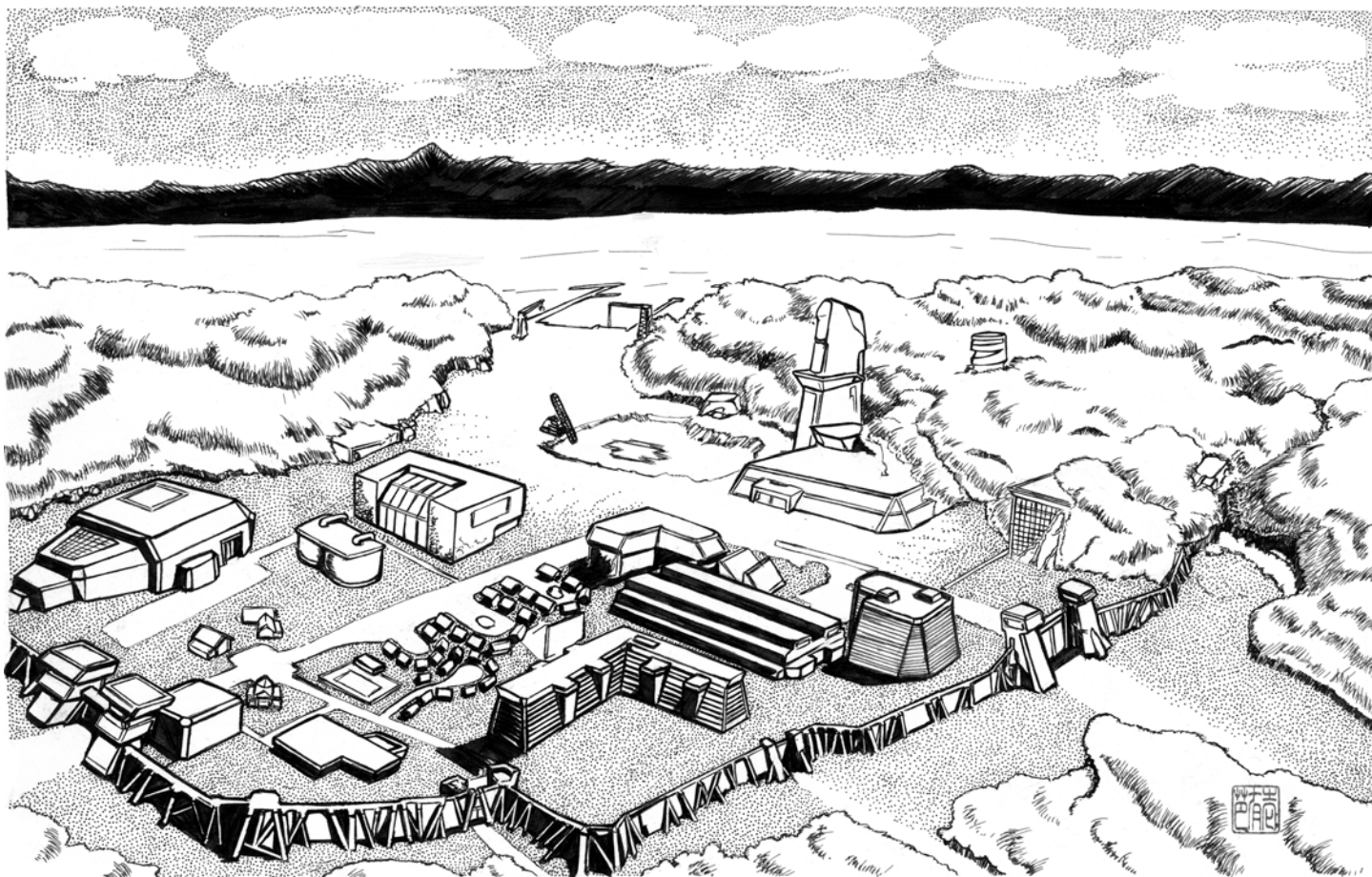
Skills of Note: Explosive Ordnance Sniffer and Reconnaissance Scout skills (see **The Rifter® #59**).

Features: Standard Gorehound, plus the Shar Pei Breed Enhancements: Stealth Field, Grip Hairs, Acid Blood and Motion Detection.

Known Weapons:

1. Right Shoulder-Mounted Heat Projector Cannon. Damage: 1D8x10+10 M.D. Range: 1,800 feet (549 m).

2. Trench Foot Mines (2 behind each front leg). Damage: 4D12 M.D. to a 10 foot (3 m) blast radius.



The Town of Semjaw

Optional Material for Rifts®

By Brett Caron

History

No current resident of Semjaw knows exactly how the settlement was founded, but it's surmised that humans stumbled upon the ruins of a Golden Age manufacturing plant and stuck around to hunt for usable technology. Over time, adventurers from neighboring kingdoms came for trade and settled down. The kingdom has amassed a sizeable population, many of whom work in or around the old factory's bones, reclaiming old tech. A loose association of Operators holds some sway with the local government, along with the merchants' guild.

Associations, Loyalties, Disposition

As a town that has grown in the shadow of technology recovered from the facility, Semjaw is not a magic kingdom in any sense of the word. While there are mages and psychics counted among the population, and they are free to be who they are without fear of persecution, they are a minority and the government and zeitgeist of the town is one of technological advancement to tame the wilderness around them.

As such, Semjaw has caught the eye of the Coalition. Iron Heart has reached out tentatively, expressing a desire for a meet-

ing of minds between the governors of Semjaw and CS Iron Heart. This has been set in motion, and the CS delegation is actually en route to Semjaw as the player characters are arriving to the town's border!

Ontario being relatively rich in areas of high magical energy, there are several ley lines that run within 5-10 miles of Semjaw, although none contact the town itself. Through the system of interconnected ley lines, transit or shipping to the city of Lazlo is a paltry 6 hours – but with no official trade agreement between the two communities, the mystically inclined in Semjaw have been unable to gain enough of a foothold to promote serious magical trade in this area.

Stats/Districts

Population: 800 permanent residents, 60-90 families, with another 200-300 visitors at any given moment.

Breakdown: Roughly 60% workers and their families, with another 10% merchants, 10% adventurers/soldiers, 5% mages and psychics, and the rest being a mix of skilled or unskilled permanent residents.

The town isn't divided into districts per se, but there is a defined area surrounding the ruins of the facility that is informally known as "Shift Zone" – almost all the work pertaining to the old factory takes place here, with the rest of the space being given over to residential and market areas. The loose government is centralized near the Market and Shift Zone, with the residential areas lying along the bottom border wall below everything else.

Shift Zone

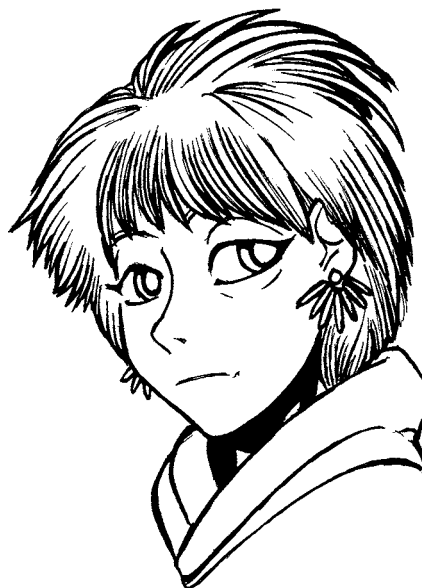
The northmost area of the city is the Shift Zone, where the various workers go to each day to excavate or examine the facility, or repair and maintain sections that have already been excavated. There is a port here, mostly used for the disposal of excavated material.

The Market

A bustling area of familiar Semjaw suppliers and travelling merchants, all shopping their wares for the travelling adventurers and laborers working in the mine. Includes a trade harbor, some permanent stores (including an NG outlet that has recently opened its doors) and a mix of plants/game/wilderness barter goods, technology, common items, magical spells and items, Techno-Wizardry, and artifacts/books/pre-Rifts items. Beginning to eclipse the factory itself in what draws newcomers to town – if you want the best, go to Lazlo, but if you want a deal, go to Semjaw.

Home Zone

Much of the area given over to the residences of workers and townspeople are houses, but with the recent influx of industry (mostly Operators come to work in the facility), some apartment buildings have sprung up between the houses and the market. Each of them houses as much as 100 people, and the homeowners enjoy the commotion of the market's bars and clubs muffled by the intervening buildings.



Jordy Mayir, 6th level Robot Pilot, Councilwoman, unofficial leader of Semjaw

After making a career for herself as a robot pilot when she was younger, Jordy decided it would be smart to retire early. When she and the remains of her unit set up in Semjaw during the boom, some of them went to work in the factory while the rest amalgamated with other mercs as the official defense force. Not yet a Council member at the time, Klarck Jhrzhyllcr took notice of the young woman when Jordy represented the mercenaries during their integration. His advice was invaluable to her at the time, and at the end of the process she cashed out her robot to focus on the role he offered her on the governing council. Since then, she's found that she's good at municipal governance and likes the work. She still keeps a Samson around for emergencies, but finds she's lost the taste for combat and killing since becoming a mother.

In her adventuring days, Jordy had a couple of run-ins with the CS, and knows what they can do – more importantly, she knows what they're capable of. She even has a respect for them born from some work her merc outfit did with the CS Army years ago, during a period of Xiticix expansion close to Iron Heart. She chafes against CS policy when it comes to D-Bees – this is her biggest conflict when it comes to the CS approaching Semjaw for annexation.

If she talks to the player characters, depending on the circumstances she'll listen to what they have to say, especially if it's important. However, unless any characters are citizens of Semjaw then they don't truly have sway over her.

Stats: I.Q. 16, M.E. 9, M.A. 14, P.S. 14, P.P. 12, P.E. 12, P.B. 13, Spd 17.

Alignment: Unprincipled.

Shoth McIntyr, 4th level Zapper, Councilman

The most outspoken voice on the Council in favor of joining the CS is Shoth McIntyr, and when he speaks, the air seems to crackle with raw kinetic power. He has been a staunch defender of Semjaw all his life. Shoth is a human supremacist, plain and simple. He believes that with the Coming of the Rifts, humanity's psionic potential has been unlocked, and that they must reclaim



the planet as their birthright. He loves the Coalition and he will happily submit to IC registration if the annexation takes place.

He has barely-disguised disgust for anything nonhuman, thinks magic is filthy and alien, and privately hopes that if and when the CS swallows Semjaw, he can take part in the purge that will make Semjaw a 'pure' place devoid of alien life. He's a strong voice for many of the refugees who came north after the horrors of the Sorcerers' Revenge at Tolkeen, and are fearful of what they saw there.

Will always give humans the benefit of the doubt, even D-Bee lovers, only escalating to lethal force if they do so first, but kills anything nonhuman (in battle) without a second thought. That said, he's not completely reckless. He wouldn't throw the first punch or energy blast unless being humiliated, viciously antagonized, or outright attacked by a D-Bee in public.

Stats: I.Q. 8, M.E. 14, M.A. 17, P.S. 22, P.P. 12, P.E. 14, P.B. 11, Spd 14.

Alignment: Aberrant.

Powers: 28 M.D.C. from electrical body protection and ½ damage from energy attacks. He generally uses his natural powers (draining weapons within 80 feet/24.4 m, Telekinesis, and TK blasts) or a light rail gun he's strong enough to lift even without Telekinesis (4D6 M.D.). Wears 50 M.D.C. body armor, has a Zapper Gun (stun weapon), and uses Telekinesis to send grenades every which way – he likes to follow up with a force field to make sure the enemy is caught in the explosion.

Klarck Jhrzhyller, 11th level Rogue Scholar, Councilman

The final member of the council is also the oldest, having lived in Semjaw longer than either of the others. Klarck can usually be found teaching at the first school in Semjaw. The workers and their families are grateful for both the education their children receive and the fact that the scholar and his assistants are the unofficial daycare a day or two out of the week. Of course, this is only those families who feel safe leaving their children alone with a 15-foot (4.6 m) snake. Those who do, see their children return home always smiling and full of stories that "Mr. Klarck told today." Many are learning to read, as Klarck has a particular gift for painting and draws colorful pictures for his simple books that

make reading fun. The rest of the time he can be found working with his colleagues unearthing the secrets of the facility.

He's not actually a snake – he's a D-Bee, a four-tentacled, snake-like race called Vernulians. His powers of psychic healing and his easygoing nature mean that he's well-liked despite his obviously nonhuman appearance. Although educated in Lazlo on many sciences and subjects, his passion is post-Rifts history; he's always willing to answer questions if he can. Obviously he is staunchly against the annexation of Semjaw, or any relationship with the CS at all. But he has decided to let his answer on this matter be settled by a vote to the town, whose decision he will respect. He knows that no matter what happens, Jordy will do what she thinks is right.

Stats: I.Q. 21, M.E. 16, M.A. 20, P.S. 18 (Augmented), P.P. 16, P.E. 12, P.B. 5, Spd 17. 15 feet/4.6 m long, can stand up to 10 feet/3 m tall, 132 M.D.C.

Alignment: Principled.

Skills: Many lore and technical skills, most science skills, plus computers and communications.

Any member of the Council will hear their people speak, but tensions are running high. No one is sure whether one side or another has more support – this is Canada, and people are usually willing to stay quiet and leave each other alone. But with the introduction of the CS into this equation, all of a sudden these tight-knit people are being asked to put aside everything but their differences.

Jordy Mayir is the swing vote – Klarck will get the vote he's looking for, that the people want to keep their free way of life. That's a dead heat. But the people also trust Jordy. She's held this town together since it exploded from wilderness trading post to an organized community of laborers, engineers, soldiers, and the families they all work for. They know that whatever she says to the CS she says in the interest of everyone she represents.

Many are afraid either way, and the refugees from the Sorcerers' Revenge won't even come out of their houses while the Dead Boys are around. Klarck has a plan to get all of them to the nearby ley line if the CS becomes hostile or wants to immediately take control of the town. If this happens then Shoth will try and stop them, including killing everyone but the humans.

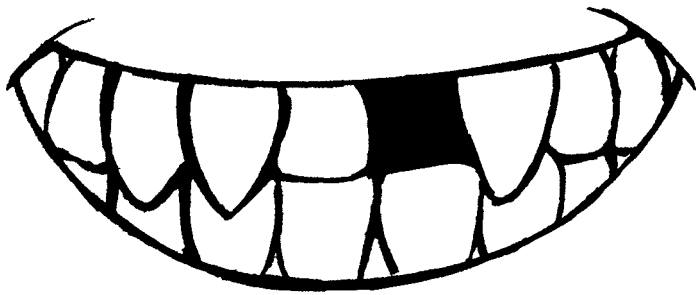
The long and short of it is – for all intents and purposes, Klarck speaks for the rest of the scientists and scholars unearthing the secrets of the mine wherever possible. Some are charismatic and known around town (30%; a few such NPCs to be fleshed out would be Irva, Kollee, and Jim), but many are bookish, nervous D-Bees or otherwise antisocial (50%) and the rest are too obsessed with the past to be involved (20%).

Bars, Merchants, and Other Personalities

Hole in the Jaw

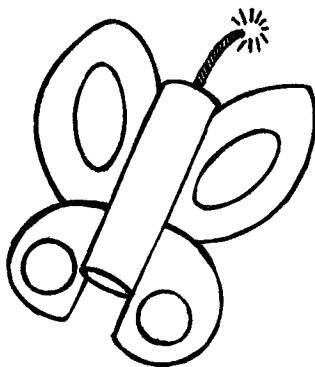
(Bar; sign is a grin with a tooth gone.)

This is *the* blue-collar bar in Semjaw, catering mostly to people who work in the excavating facility. They serve cheap beer and liquor, hearty food, and rooms by the night for drunks and travelers (or by the hour for just about anyone, depending on who you ask). But seriously, it's the food.



Morffytz enjoys the fish especially, coming here often – he’s well-respected among most of the workers who eat and drink with him for his engineering knowledge and hard work ethic. He prefers to read over a beer or tea curled up on a chair, but can sometimes be found talking with the older men and women in deep discussion.

Run by a retired Headhunter named Jaffer. He’s an easygoing guy and a family man, but has no tolerance for trouble in his bar. Unfortunately, lots of adventurers come through the place after hearing great things about the food, and he can’t seem to keep them out. He’s settled for hiring a lazy Larmac to look tough and bounce the bad ones. Jaffer is accepting that Semjaw is changing. He might even look forward to more security if the CS decides to invest in the town – but this would mean losing his bouncer, whom he’s actually growing to like.



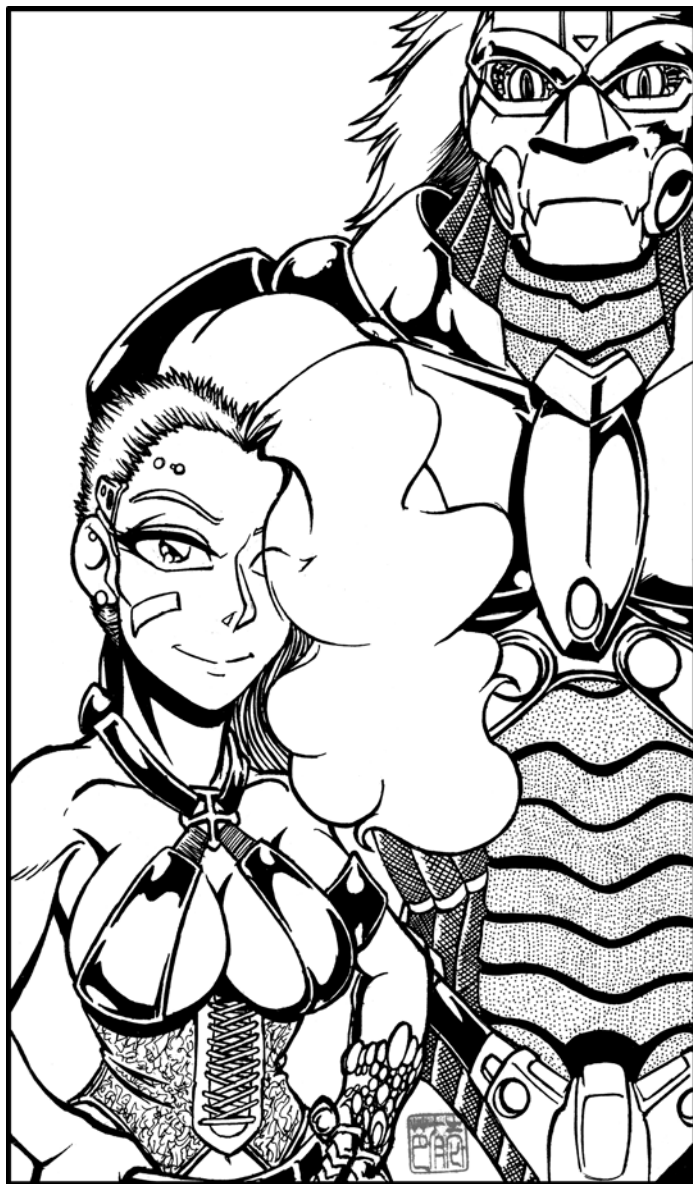
Butterfly Boom

(Bar; sign is a butterfly with a stick of dynamite for a body.)

On the other side of the Market, near the trade port, is the other big bar in town. Butterfly Boom is run by an ex-City Rat from Iron Heart named Dally Dynamite. She brought her Black Market connections with her, and can usually bring new stuff into town a few (1D4) times a month. Of course, that’s without Dead Boys around.

Besides selling stolen and knock-off merchandise out of the back, Butterfly Boom is an anything-goes kind of joint. Sammy, a 9 foot combat cyborg stuffed full of black-market enhancements, keeps a running tab of damages with his sensory upgrades. When the bill gets to the rowdy customer, they either argue with Sammy or pay the damages. Most people pay. That said, the waitresses and Dally herself (now a Saloon Girl O.C.C. having grown out of being a ‘Rat) are talented at convincing adventurers and gang members to fight in the nightly cage matches instead of on their tables. There are also tournaments every Friday called Tough Goons In Fights (I can’t wait for TGIF!) that pull in some decent prize money – 2D6 to 4D6 x 10,000 credits per fight!

When she took her last big score in the ‘Burbs and left Iron Heart on the back of the fastest hovercycle she could get, she nev-



er thought she’d have to lay eyes on a Dead Boy ever again. She’s frantic that everything is over for her here, and if the CS decides it’s interested in Semjaw, she’ll move house with Sammy, maybe to Old Bones, while she figures out what to do next. Of course, she’d much rather just get rid of them and stay where she is.

Northern Gun

(Market)

Northern Gun’s Sales Reps like what they see in Semjaw. A booming community with a monster problem? Works for them. Most importantly, NG sees an opportunity in the facility being excavated by the town’s loose association of Operators, soldiers, and scientists. If the rumors floating around town are true, this could be a major technological breakthrough that NG wants to be a part of. Consequently, they opened a small outlet to test the waters and stationed an undercover LPO there to keep an eye on the ongoing work.

The floor is usually managed by June Nuln, a chipper Sales Rep (5th level) and a ruthless negotiator. She can usually talk someone up to 10 or 20% above list price by throwing in cheap add-ons and enough dimples. (I.Q. 19, M.E. 16, M.A. 22, P.B. 18

– think Lisa Kudrow playing a dunce even though she’s smart as hell.) They only carry Samson Mk1 and 3 for power armor, and only one each of the Beachmaster and a Bigfoot, but as for weapons and armor, they carry a full range of gear. (They’re waiting on a larger variety of robots and power armor since both have been selling well, and they’re planning on expanding next year regardless of the situation with the CS.) They also do repairs on NG gear courtesy of Yal, their on-site NG Operator (although mostly you just hear him yelling from the back).

The face of the operation is the LPO (Loss Prevention Officer) himself, George Lee (6th level). But George leaves June to the bulk of the day-to-day work (she is the only employee aware of his LPO status), spending much of his time engaged in monitoring the goings-on at the excavation site using all the NG tech at his disposal. Aerial drones, reconnaissance robots, and good old-fashioned microphones or cameras have given him almost as clear a picture as Morffytz as to the nature of the site. He just doesn’t know if NG wants him to try and buy them out or simply make sure they won’t be competition.

However, this discovery is fairly recent, and Lee hasn’t received word back from his superiors as to what they’d like to do next. All he can do is watch the clock as the CS negotiates with the town leaders. NG may back off depending on how the town responds to CS demands. But with the nonaggression pact and alliance between the two nations, NG is finding it difficult to ensure that the CS doesn’t wind up with the tech without blowing that relationship.

Secrets of Earth

(Market; sign is a question mark wherein the center of the upper part contains an Earth.)

Reminiscent of a used records store or a post-apocalyptic gift shop, Secrets of Earth is one of the most popular stores in town. Many people around town wear T-shirts printed with contemporary 20th or 21st Century logos and characters, or have small, stuffed cats in their windows, hanging from suction cups. It’s all a bunch of nonsense, but it helps both humans and D-Bees understand the world that they’re all digging up at the other end of town every day.

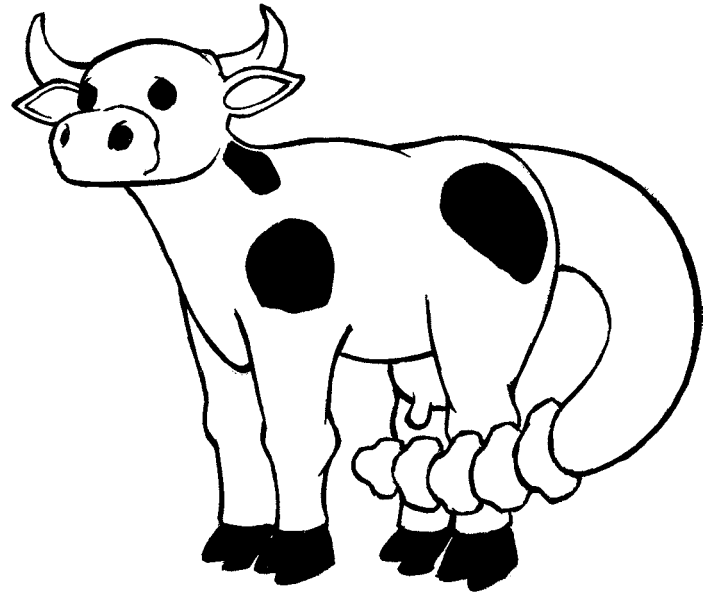
The place is run by a reserved young woman named Fugi (4th level Rogue Scholar). She’s got a serious expression most of the time, usually drawing or scribbling in a notebook at the back and only coming to help when her front man is too busy to handle it. She also runs the register sometimes, and usually has something sarcastic to say.

Luckily, her front man is exactly charismatic enough to make up for this. Tribble McStallion is a Fingertooth Carpetbagger salesman (11th level, master salesman with a natural knack for it – all relevant skills at 98%!) who walked whistling into the store two years ago and asked Fugi what she’d like most to sell today. Then he walked out into the street, brought someone inside and sold them a coffee mug from the year 2000 for 25 credits.

Thanks to Tribble (who loves it when people call him Mr. McStallion and frequently gives them a small discount), sales are up and business is good. When Tribble brokered an exclusive deal with the excavators for any pre-Rifts objects not military or outright technological in nature in exchange for a measly 10% of the sales, business got even better. Now that she has enough money to fund her archaeological expedition to Wormwood, Fugi

is considering just selling the store to the jocular D-Bee – especially since business won’t be nearly so good under the Coalition.

For his part, Tribble is having a great time – he loves the people here and the boom this town is experiencing is exciting and new. But like many D-Bees in town, he’ll have to flee if the CS are here to stay.



Rattle & Cattle

(Market; sign is a cow with a rattlesnake’s tail.)

Run by a family of humans with exotic accents and a natural affinity for dangerous wildlife, Rattle & Cattle sells livestock from cows to interdimensional creatures resembling beetles (4 feet/1.2 m tall, 8 feet/2.4 m long, with 5 legs) that taste remarkably like chicken. (They have those, too.) The Dinnels family say their grandparents told them they came from Oz, but don’t know where that is. People in Semjaw find their accent charming and it helps sales.

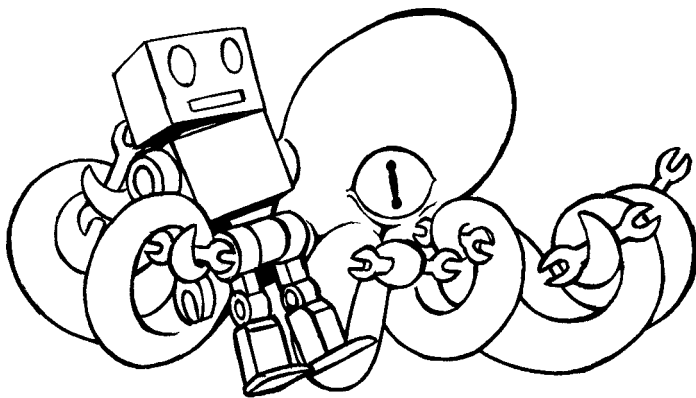
The Dinnels are a one-stop shop for any common, rare, or exotic animal and plant (for farming, for food, for breeding, eating, etc.) or travelers who seek something stranger. They offer alien options to conventional Earth oxen, chickens, and cats (getting rid of rodents). One of the brothers is a low-level Shifter, and they frequently make runs into other dimensions to obtain new specimens.

Mr. Fixit’s Elbow Greasery

(Market; sign is an octopus holding tools grappling with a rusty robot.)

During the day, many people who walk by this looming warehouse of an Op-Shop plug their fingers in their ears to muffle the noise. It’s a 12-man operation (no pun intended) of experienced (5-9th level) Operators and Psi-Techs who are the core of the town. They not only manufacture and maintain all the heavy-duty machinery that excavates tons of rock, but also the gear of the human and D-Bee workers who chip away at the “mine” every day.

Mr. Fixit himself is an Octo-Man named Morffytz Atlazlo, a child of an Atlantean refugee who was taught his trade in Lazlo. He considers himself very lucky, and is almost as much scholar as engineer. His affinity and passion for his work, and his preci-



sion, is something to behold, watching him swing from support to scaffold to ceiling from tentacle to tentacle as he works on a large robot or vehicle. His crew are usually either working on jobs in the main area (open to the public to view as they walk by the open warehouse doorway) or in the private workshop. One or two will almost always be consulting at the “mine,” too. Morffytz is usually backed up for custom jobs, but as it turns out, the first time the party visits he will have an immediate opening for any custom work they might like that can be done in the same amount of time (about 12 hours) due to a cancellation (due to being atomized by particle beams).

Morffytz is better-informed on what they’ve found underground than any other single person in town. He keeps his mouth shut about it to most, but the time is quickly arriving before he has to tell Klarck or Judy or even Dynamite to make sure that the tech doesn’t fall into the hands of the CS. Depending on what he knows of the player characters, he would even trust a group of adventurers that he thought might be able to make a difference.

The Market is bustling, with lots of little vendors (and some magicians among them, selling minor magic items, scrolls, and the occasional spell – nothing over 4th or 5th level spells and effects) and some bigger stores selling technology, guns, survival gear, and all the other day-to-day items both townfolk, wilderness folk, and adventurers may need.

Other Areas in Town

Ports

The trade port is run by Pyotr Kenin, a Russian cyborg immigrant from Warlord Yuriyev’s domain. After being stranded in Ontario by a Rift, Pyotr has found his true calling as a sailor and a naval warrior. He defends both ports by working with the defense force, and they look the other way whenever he brings in questionable goods to Dally Dynamite, a magic-user or vendor in town, or anyone who knows to ask.

Otherwise, the port is aboveboard, with shipments and travelers coming in from Lake Huron day and night. Small satellite communities do their business through the port instead of the front gate, but everyone winds up at the Market and the variety and sheer quantity sold increases by the day. The other port is for incoming equipment to the dig and outgoing rock and scree to be dumped out in Lake Huron (they’re actually building a defensive reef nearby).

Kenin is a Light Machine with several nautical upgrades that make him a fearsome opponent in a boarding action. He is also

a seasoned soldier (6th level Headhunter) and has learned much about naval combat since coming here.

Town Square and Council Building

Upon entering Semjaw, the inns and bars line the open square, unmarked by any monument or statue but just a simple bulletin board for the people of the town. Mostly pictures dot this, children’s artwork or drawings of monsters found in the nearby forests with cautionary markings for the illiterate. There are also advertisements and directions, along with a large map of the town with the major buildings and areas marked for everyone.

Through the square, a fork in the road leads south to the residential areas (including several 3-4 storey apartment buildings and one or two 24-hour marts), and north to the dig site and factory itself, or straight through to the Market and ports.

The rest of the space is simple benches and a raised dais on one side for special events like weddings or announcements. This is the space that will be used by the CS to address Semjaw when the Death’s Head sets down right at the open gates to the city. The Council chamber is further back, near the excavator admin buildings, Body Fixer (5th level, paid by the excavators), and orphanage (cared for by a Psi-Healer).

All four inns are roughly the same, offering rooms by the night, week, or month. They close their kitchens and bars early, however, and let travelers head to one of the nearby bars if they want to party and drink (and fight). This means that at night, the town square is frequently a bit of a party zone, especially once the Market closes. Dead Boys hanging around will put a damper on the vibe, and if they or the locals get really drunk (70% chance) it could get ugly.



The Prancing Phony

Inn; expensive – 250/1500/6500, very posh, run by a D’norr Devilwoman.

U R Home

Inn; cheap – 25/100/500, awful and busted, run by an unscrupulous human.

People Garage

Inn; 50/300/1000, run by a D-Bee robot posing as a ‘Borg – what do humans need to live, again?

The Turtle’s Shell

Inn; 70/450/1600, run by a pair of psychic twins with constant Telepathy/Empathy on.

Reaper Cell

A Story for Rifts® Secrets of the Coalition States™: The Disavowed™

By Dan Frederick

Part One: Rise

"It is the spirit and not the form of law that keeps justice alive." – Earl Warren

Prologue

Colonel Thaddius Lyboc sat in the chair, uncomfortable and annoyed. Idly, he tore small pieces of paper off his coffee cup and laid them out in a neat row on the table before him.

Major Mosin was late.

Colonel Lyboc looked around the café. It took him a few minutes, but he singled out the two undercover ISS operatives. The Colonel shook his head and sighed. These guys were supposed to be pros. Blend in. See and don't be seen. They were obvious though. Burly guys dressed like City Rats. If they were part of his division, Thaddius would bust them back to Peacekeeper patrol. Chuckling to himself, he was still annoyed, but nothing made him feel more alive than the shadowy game of espionage and covert affairs.

Standing up and walking over to the cream and sugar stand, Thaddius subtly watched his watchers. Flipping through an assortment of flavored creamers, his hands kept busy as he watched the two "City Rats" out of the corner of his eye.

Thaddius happily took a random creamer when he saw it. Both ISS agents looked at a younger man who was sitting in the corner of the café.

As he slowly took a few napkins out of the holder, he turned to allow himself a better view of the little man the ISS agents had glanced at. Their leader hadn't reacted so both ISS agents kept on playing their parts as "Rats" enjoying morning coffee.

Thaddius turned to walk back towards his table and saw Mosin outside the café window.

Mosin looked like he was adjusting his hair in the reflection of the café window. Looking at Thaddius but not being obvious about it.

As the Colonel walked back towards his seat, he shook his head "no" and held out four fingers, pointed down, signaling to Mosin to wait.

Passing his table, Thaddius walked over to the table in the corner of the café. He had to admit this guy did look his part. The little man looked like a weasel and nothing at all like an ISS operative.

Sitting down at the weasel's table, Thaddius said, "I like you. I don't think I would have spied you had it not been for your two thugs."

The little man was in his late twenties, had a nasty little mustache and dark, beady eyes. Taking the newspaper up off

the table, the weasel flipped it open and appeared to ignore the Colonel, hiding his face from view.

His squeaky voice carried over the paper to Thaddius.

"Colonel, I am truly embarrassed. I thought the obvious spies would hide my being here. Those morons will be back on the beat tomorrow."

Thaddius really did like this fellow.

Reaching across the table and taking the paper away from the weasel, Thaddius said, "Who are you, son?"

The little man glanced at the Colonel of Espionage Division and then at the two big "City Rats" standing behind the Colonel.

The weasel sighed and said, "Go. Report back to HQ and I'll meet you later."

The two Rats, both ISS agents, solemnly left the café.

Sitting back in his chair, the weasel said, "I am Captain Lawrence Kief."

The Colonel chuckled, "Ahh. The Spider. Captain Kief, I have heard of you. You mostly operate on the lower levels here in Chi-Town. Commissioned as an ISS officer 14 years ago. Prior to that you came from Iron Heart. You were a Tech Officer there for five years. You have a good service record with the ISS. I think my division offered you a position in espionage around five years ago. You turned it down. You have a cyber-disguise AA-1 and amplified hearing implants. Oh, and what was it, a finger laser?"

The Spider looked peeved. Nodding, he said, "Yes, Colonel. You're right on all counts. I don't like the way you enforce the law."

Lyboc smiled, "The end result, whatever it takes. Protecting the Coalition States is my form of law enforcement. If you don't have the stomach for that, it's best you stay in the ISS."

The Spider drank the rest of his now cold coffee and stayed quiet.

"Are you inclined to tell me why ISS is watching me, Captain?"

Captain Kief stood up. "Nope. Orders. You have a fantastic day, Sir."

As the Spider walked away towards the exit, Colonel Lyboc called out to him, "Son, I suggest you work on your etiquette and avoid my proximity."

Chapter One

The Captain stopped, flipped up the collar of his leather coat, and turned around to face the Colonel. Thaddius saw a young black man with bright blue eyes looking at him. "Oh yes, Sir, I will avoid you, your division, and your black-hearted form of justice." The man then left the café.

Moments later, Major Mosin entered the café. Colonel Lyboc stood up and walked into the back of the café, followed by the Major. The two men entered the empty manager's office and closed the door. Sitting down at the manager's table, Colonel Lyboc flipped a switch on the equipment located on the desk. A faint static hum could be heard.

Colonel Lyboc grunted. "ISS. Real cops. They are so often incorruptible. Now that we are alone, Major, I will inform you of what was said between Joseph and me in our meeting last night."

Major Mosin sat down across from the Colonel and listened. Colonel Lyboc said, "As I have said before, desperate times require desperate measures. War has nothing to do with morality or justice. It's all about winning or dying. We cannot bind our hands with high ideals, even our own, or worry about the laws of renegade nations or the rights of alien people. We must fight fire with fire, and you are the match. You and your new team. You personally are riding a fine line of knowing too much and being of great use to the Coalition, Major. As of now, you and your team will be disavowed. I have classified your team as Reaper Cell. We will not meet again; you no longer work for the Secret Police, Intelligence, me or the RCSG division. In the future, you will report directly to Colonel Douglas Hunter. I have a briefcase here for you. In it are your orders."

Sliding the case across the floor with his boot, the Colonel continued, "Don't let me down, Mosin. Keep your team in line. Never let anyone know you and yours are CS, and good luck. You will be working with a foul-hearted mage on this first mission. This Shifter comes highly recommended by the Vanguard, but I would never fully trust those magic users no matter how dedicated they appear to be to our CS. It might be a good idea if this Vanguard Shifter doesn't return from this mission."

Mosin picked up the case, stood, saluted the Colonel, and nodded his thanks.

"Close the door on your way out, Mosin," Thaddius said.

The disavowed Mosin left, shutting the door. Thaddius turned on the monitor on the desk. Nodding at the figure on the screen, Thaddius greeted the man who had been listening on the other end.

"Nice speech, Thaddius. This game of ours is dangerous. You do have it under control, I presume?"

Colonel Lyboc nodded, "Yes, Sir. I explained in the orders to our former RCSG Intelligence officer, Major Mosin, that they have one week to get their team used to each other and then get to the rendezvous location. I also took the liberty of assigning three separate cells to this mission. I put Derringer Cell on it a few days ago, and now Reaper Cell under Major Mosin. Last week I gave the same orders to Shadow Cell, so one of the three should be able to accomplish the objectives. It's under control."

The two hovercycles screamed across the open expanse of desert. It was still technically winter in New Mexico, but it was a hot day today. The two hovercycles sped along at speeds of over a hundred miles per hour. The Desert Fox hovercycle was painted white with a red skull. The Desert Fox bolted forward, increasing speed, ahead of the other, larger, black hovercycle.

The pilot of the black hovercycle was an old, one-eyed man named Odin. Odin may have known the desert here in New Mexico better than the other pilot, but the younger man, named Soto, was a daredevil of a pilot and loved revving his Desert Fox to top speed whenever he could.

As the land suddenly fell away from the two cycles, the ground dropping down into a deep gully, both cycles shot out across the void, Odin hooted and laughed aloud with excitement.

Hearing the old man over the comm unit, Soto laughed back, saying, "Hell yes!"

"Looks like some mesas ahead; we'll have some fun tearing between them! Be careful, Odin!" Soto exclaimed across the comm.

Odin continued to giggle and said, "Reckon I will be as careful as you are, Soto! Hot damn, I never figured you Coalition boys could be this fun!"

Sweeping through the tight opening between two raised mounds of rock and sand, the two cycles got dangerously close to each other.

Side by side at about 100 miles per hour, the two pilots leaned forward, both aware that they had about three feet between them.

Odin giggled, "Ya try'n to kiss me, boy?"

Soto cranked his speed up, shooting ahead of Odin again and pulling in front of Odin's cycle. There wasn't room to fly side by side now.

Odin, who had M.O.M. implants which allowed him to see much further into the distance than Soto's human eyes could, yelled across the comm as they both tore through the narrow space surrounded by rock, "Oh crap! Soto! There's no ground up there! It drops and we are really going to be flying!"

Soto thought about it for the briefest of seconds. "Screw it! My Fox can handle about a 300-foot drop. Let's go!"

As they rapidly approached the drop-off, the path widened and Odin jumped forward next to Soto's Desert Fox.

As they whipped across the expanse, dust swirling madly in the twin wake of the speeding cycles, Odin called out, "Hey, Soto. We just stole my cycle. You have any idea what drop it can handle?"

Soto said, "No. Slow down if you want to."

Odin thought, this dude's crazier than me, I need a beer. Aloud he said, "Hey, if I live you owe me a real drink!"

Soto yelled into the comm, "Hell yes!"

Like two bullets, the cycles ripped across the open space beyond the small pathway, out into the nothing. Soto looked down at the rapidly advancing ground, rushing up at him. He saw that the drop was only about 200 feet and felt both exhilaration and

ration and relief. That was the good news; both cycles should be able to handle the drop. The bad news, he saw with the beginning of fear, was at the bottom of the ravine were hundreds of class IV demons.

Soto yelled, "Aw, hell no!"

There was no way he was going to be able to slow and turn his Fox in time. Odin was giggling madly over the comm, "Attack! Attack!"

Soto took stock of the demons quickly as they plummeted down towards them.

There had to be at least three hundred demons! They were all the same kind; his training in demon lore from his days at Ranger school ran through his mind. He'd never seen this kind before but they were obviously demons from the dimension of Hades.

It looked like a tall, sickly Baal-Rog demon, heavily deformed, was marching east away from a massive pit that was being dug by both demons and human slaves. Many of the demons and humans looked up at him and Odin as they sped into their ranks.

At an altitude of about ten feet, both cycles leveled off with the ground, both engines whining loudly at the descent and the strain of leveling off.

Racing in amongst the demons on the west side of the gigantic pit, Odin was tossing grenades right and left. Trying to maintain control of his Fox, Soto was busy with both hands and unable to get his L-20 rifle out. He barely managed to avoid colliding with several demons head on. Zipping around them, Soto flipped on his forward-mounted laser.

Several of the humans must have thought this was a rescue attempt, as they attacked their captors with digging tools. Fools, thought Soto, that would be like hitting a SAMAS Power Armor with a pebble!

Odin was screaming insanely at the top of his lungs as he rammed a demon who was about to tear a slave in half.

The black cycle erupted in an explosion that sent Odin spinning through the air. The demon was flayed open across its back and dropped the human.

As Odin righted himself like a cat flying through the air, he landed feet first in the desert sand and rolled. Coming up onto his feet, running towards the open pit and straight at a demon, Odin pulled his out IP-10 ion pistol and opened fire on the demon. The blasts punched little holes through it. Shooting the demon 12 times as he ran towards it, Odin jumped high and landed a kick into the demon's face. The thing fell back into the open pit.

As it tumbled down into the pit, Odin was sprinting right and dodging about madly as he reloaded.

Soto was dumbfounded. Insane! Awesome. He opened fire on a demon that was arcing its whip towards Odin. The small laser wasn't doing a lot of damage to the demon, but it distracted it.

Soto raced forward and kicked out at the whip-wielding demon as he shot past it. He knocked the demon over and it tumbled down into the pit.

The slave rebellion didn't last long. They really had no chance. Cowering beneath the demons, the humans gave up, crying and shaking with fright.

Soto turned on a dime with the nimble Desert Fox and nearly fell off the hovercycle. Pointed at Odin, he ripped across the desert straight at him.

Odin had jumped up onto a demon and was punching his IP-10 into its face, over and over, and with each punch he pulled the trigger on the little, modified ion pistol.

The demon managed to backhand Odin off and toss him down onto the desert ground. Dust burst up around Odin from the impact. Soto heard him moan across the comm.

Screaming to a stop directly behind the demon, Soto stopped, pulled his L-20 pulse rifle around from his back, and fired several bursts into the creature's head.

As the demon staggered away from Odin, holding its head in pain, Soto kicked the Fox forward a few feet next to Odin. He was still giggling and saying something about needing a drink as he wobbly stood up.

Soto yelled across the comm, "Come here!"

He grabbed onto Odin's arm, and seeing a massive wave of demons moving closer to them, he hit the vertical jets on the little Fox.

Screaming in protest from carting two passengers, and from bolting straight upwards to maximum height, the Fox's gauges were all in the red.

At a height of about 300 feet, Soto shot the cycle towards the north, away from the massive pit and waves of angry demons.

Odin clung to Soto as they raced away. Soto didn't look back. He concentrated on not dropping Odin and not crashing the hovercycle.

Odin apparently could see the demons still, as he reported to Soto over the comm, "They're not following us!"

After ten minutes, the Fox started to jolt and became harder to pilot as max speed and altitude heated the small nuclear engine.

Soto lowered altitude and speed. Still racing along at 80 to 90 mph, Odin climbed up behind Soto.

"We have to go back," Odin said. "We have to rescue those people!"

Soto slowed to about 20 mph and turned the cycle in a circle, looking back at the demons in the far distance before heading north again.

Soto stopped the cycle and lowered the kickstands, and both of the men got down. Soto's knees felt weak as he stood there. Odin was dancing from one foot to the other. Raising his eye patch, he looked back towards the demons.

With 20/20 vision for two miles, Odin described to Soto that the demons were back to digging and pushing the humans slaves around.

"What about that deformed big one, the sickly looking Baal-Rog thing?" asked Soto.

"It's headed east still."

Soto leaned against the Fox. "Look, Odin. We were lucky to get away. I'm not going back. Too many. We'd die trying."



Odin nodded. "Okay, Soto. But I reckon I'm going to have to split up with you here."

"Why?" asked Soto.

Odin smiled at Soto. "I'll try finding you later if I can, my boy. I need to go back to Socorro, to tell them about this pit. I've no idea what it's for but you know it's bad. Those people deserve to be saved. I'm going to get help."

Soto sighed. "Alright. Do you want me to give you a lift?"

Odin looked about. "No. I'll run. It'll only take half a day from here. Go. I know you are supposed to be headed back to Lone Star. Go. Go report in and tell your leaders about this. You kill some demons with your CS boys and I'll get the mercenaries I know in Socorro informed about this pit."

They shook hands and Soto mounted the cycle.

"Be safe, Odin." Soto saluted the Wired Slinger and turned northeast. He'd go wide and get another look at the deformed demon on his way to Lone Star.

After Soto sped off, Odin stopped waving. He checked his IP-10, prepped several clips for reloading, and counted out his remaining 13 grenades. Slowly, he headed back towards the hell pit and its human slaves. He was just one man – one superhuman man – but he would free as many slaves as he could. The mercenaries he knew in Socorro would not be brave enough to save these people – not without a big paycheck, and Odin didn't have any credits. He'd just have to do it himself. With a big grin on his face, he felt the rush of being a hero.

Chapter Two

Soto flipped the off switch to his hovercycle, and it settled on its kickstands as the engines died down.

Removing his helmet, he jumped off the hovercycle. Standing next to the decrepit wooden shack, he could see two CS troops inside, both pointing their CS energy rifles out the open door at him.

Soto turned to face the CS troopers. With a big smile on his face, he slowly reached into a Velcro pocket on the tactical pants he wore. He was wearing no armor, so he would easily be killed if either CS trooper were to fire on him.

He slowly pulled out his CS ID badge and held it up, saying, "I'm one of you. You want me to toss this in or you coming out?"

One of the CS troopers lowered his weapon and said, "Toss it in. Keep your hands where I can see 'em."

Soto flicked his ID badge through the entryway. The trooper caught it and turned it around to read the badge. After looking it over, he slid it through an ID reader that was attached to his forearm armor.

Two consecutive beeps later, the other trooper lowered his weapon. The trooper with Soto's ID motioned for him to enter.

Soto grabbed his L-20 energy rifle off his hovercycle and slung it across his back. Grabbing his backpack next, he walked into the shack.

It looked considerably more sturdy from the inside. The interior walls of the shack were constructed of armor plates, and there were several monitors and two chairs.

Soto stood right inside; there wasn't much room to move around in the small gatehouse.

As one guard removed his helmet and sat down in one of the chairs to eat his lunch, the other trooper was busy on the intercom system requesting access for a Master Sergeant I. Soto, CS Ranger.

Soto watched as the trooper spoke to a Captain on the other end of the intercom and monitor. The Captain looked past the trooper at Soto, saying, "Master Sergeant, you are late. Colonel Holler is livid. You were supposed to be here days ago!"

Soto shrugged, saying, "That sucks for the Colonel; I wasn't aware I was on a timetable. Orders just said, finish mission, report to Lone Star outpost One-Alpha-Six."

The two gate troopers stopped what they were doing and stared at Soto like he was insane.

Turning red in the face, the Captain started to bark a response, choked up, then took a deep breath obviously trying to remain calm.

After a moment of dead silence, the Captain said between clenched teeth, "Get down to level 4 and to briefing room 6."

Soto nodded at the Captain, saying, "Yes, Sir," and moved over to the small elevator built into the shack. No more than two people could stand on the platform at a time. Soto took a wide stance and held onto the handrail. As the elevator lowered, he gave the trooper eating his lunch a wink.

Once the elevator was out of sight, its passenger along with it, the two troopers looked back at the monitor.

The Captain grumbled out loud, "Damn CS Ranger. Been out too long and too far." Looking at the trooper eating, the Captain barked, "Get your helmet back on! Lunch is over," and the monitor flicked off.

* * *

Soto decided he would head to the mess hall first. After spending a few minutes there, he headed back towards the elevator with an apple in one hand and a bottle of water in the other.

Getting back onto the elevator, he headed to level 4. Finding briefing room 6 was easy enough. This CS facility was new and had all kinds of freshly painted maps and information on the metal walls. If anything, he reflected, it was overkill. There seemed to be a map every twenty feet. Just in case you got lost in between the last map and the next one.

As Soto walked up to the glass doors of briefing room 6, he could see through the clear glass walls into the room.

He sighed. There was a lot of brass in the room. His dedication to the CS would never wane and his loyalty to the CS military would always be of importance to him, but he really didn't care for rank. The higher people went up in rank, the further they seemed to be from the real world.

Soto reached out to open the door and took a deep breath. Patience. He'd be back out amongst the real world and in its dangerous environment soon enough. Stepping into the room, he dropped his backpack on the floor and leaned his rifle against the glass wall.

Soto stood at attention and offered a salute to the many officers in the room.

After an eternity, a man dressed in brown fatigues with no visible rank said, "At ease, Master Sergeant. I'm Captain Thomas Christiansen. Have a seat. The good Commander and I were just discussing the particulars to our mission parameters. You will be filled in soon enough. Just sit and stay quiet for now."

Soto looked around at the assembled people in the briefing room as the Captain went back to talking to the Commander.

When he sat down, he saw another man was looking at him. The guy looked like a wild-eyed lunatic, and like Christiansen, he was wearing brown fatigues. Taking stock of everyone in the room, Soto saw that three people were in brown fatigues and the rest were dressed in officers' dress uniforms.

There was the base Commander, who was at the moment complaining to Christiansen that if he was going to commit troops to attacking a demon city, he would need a lot more troops assigned to his command.

The others consisted of a Major, probably second in command at the base; two Captains, one was female and had the hard look of someone who had seen a lot of combat, and the other one looked more bookish; and three Lieutenants, each probably fresh out of officer training and newly assigned to the CS outpost.

Then there were the three in unmarked, brown fatigues. There was the guy who had introduced himself as Captain Christiansen, who was reassuring the Commander that when his team was done with their mission, the demon city would be easy to assault. Then there was the wild-eyed lunatic looking fellow, who was eating beef jerky like it was candy while he eyed Soto. Probably wondering who Soto was and why he, with his longer hair and unshaven face, was allowed to be in the room at all. Of everyone present, Soto was the only one who could have pulled off not looking like a CS soldier. The last guy in brown fatigues was middle-aged, and even in the unmarked uniform he looked like a burly soldier type; clean shaven, bald and hawk nosed, he had the air of a military man.

"You had better be packing a tactical nuke, Captain Christiansen, because if it looks like the demon city is too well protected when we come in, I'll pull my men out. I won't send my men into a suicidal attack," the Commander said.

Captain Christiansen nodded, "Yes, Sir, I understand. We will handle the suicidal part. The door will be open for your troops when they arrive. Thank you."

As the officers in dress uniform filed out of the briefing room behind the Commander, Christiansen sat down in one of the comfortable chairs. Sighing, he looked around at the three others.

The bald man smiled and said, "At least we know where the Commander stands. We will crush the defenses at the demon city and he'll come, Sir."

Christiansen looked at the bald man and shook his head. "Yeah. Your Annihilate spell better be powerful, Flint."

Soto stood up suddenly, looking at the bald man named Flint. Soto glanced at the Captain, who he was surprised to see pointing a C-20 laser pistol at him.

"Sit down, Soto. Flint is one of us. He's a mage, yes. But he's on our team. Your orders were straight from Colonel Lyboc, right?"

Soto nodded yes at the Captain.

"Your orders were to report to this facility, meet me, and then assist me on a mission, right?"

Again Soto nodded yes, looking back at Flint and reflecting that the man was the last one he'd have guessed as being a mage. Soto sat down as Christiansen continued talking.

"So Lyboc said to assist me in my mission. I have further orders from the Colonel here for you to look at." Christiansen slid a stack of papers towards Soto and continued, "You are hereby assigned to my team. We don't officially exist. This is Derringer Cell. We are a four-man team. Our missions are all disavowed. No one here is ever to let on that we are CS soldiers. Flint is part of a group called the Vanguard. He's with us per Colonel Lyboc's orders. You will each accept him as a full member of this team. Otherwise, I've orders to shoot you right now. Knowing the Vanguard exists for real is enough to kill you over."

The wild-eyed man shook his head and said, "Good wid me, yo," and continued to chew on jerky.

Soto nodded. "I've worked with mages several times before. Doesn't bother me. I just didn't expect there to be a mage here in a CS base. Especially a secret outpost. What specialty of magic do you practice, Flint?"

Flint steepled his fingers and leaned back in his chair. With a cultured voice, he said, "I am a Shifter. I have studied the art of dimensional travel and the summoning of beasts. I bend magic to my will in service to our Emperor and have been a member of the Vanguard my whole life. Like my father and his father, I have, secretly, always served the people of the Coalition States."

Soto nodded and said, "Commendable, Sir." Inwardly his eyes were rolling. Fanatic.

Captain Christiansen went on, "This is Lieutenant Henri Samson. He has been an Erupter with Psi-Battalion for several years. Now he's with us. Henri is a Burster."

The wild-eyed Henri held up two fingers in a peace sign, and little flames flickered above his two fingers. "Yo Soto, nice ta work wid ya."

Smiling outwardly, Soto thought, an officer ought to be able to speak better English, like Flint or Christiansen did. But Flint wasn't an officer.

Christiansen continued talking, "So, we have a Vanguard Shifter and a CS Burster. I was formerly assigned to a Special Forces unit near Tolkeen. I was there for the war and afterwards, too. Now I am with you."

Sitting back in his chair, Christiansen brushed his hair out of his face and smiled.

Flint looked at Soto and asked, "So who is our new guy, Sir?"

Christiansen leaned forward in the chair, looking at Soto. "This is Master Sergeant I. Soto. Long-Range Recon Patrol, Special Forces, CS Ranger. He is our combat and infiltration expert. Soto has spent his career killing for the CS in places no ordinary CS soldier would want to be. In a way, Soto has

been doing for a long time what we as a team are going to be doing together now. Instead of being alone, you get a team to work with now, Soto."

Christiansen smiled at Soto. "Oh. As of right now, you are each disavowed. No more rank. No more CS equipment. Don't call each other by rank at any time. Once we walk out of this installation, each of our records will be erased. Fresh start; and as mercenaries, not CS."

"Our mission?" asked Soto.

"Simple," said Christiansen. "We exit this briefing room by magic, and arrive at our campsite. Then we head towards New Mexico and assault a little demon-infested city."

"Simple," said Henri.

"For the Emperor," said Flint.

Christiansen looked at Soto.

Soto chuckled, "Let's go." He sounded more excited than he really felt.

"Right," Christiansen said.

Flint pushed himself up from the table and, brushing the wrinkles out of his fatigue pants, moved over to one of the glass walls. He slapped his palm against the glass and started chanting out a spell. The others lined up closer to Flint, at Christiansen's prompting.

Flint continued to speak his spell aloud, the words alien and unknown to the others in the room. Soon the glass appeared to twist, turning in on itself. Crackling blue and white light shot out from his open palm across the glass surface.

Soto thought it looked almost like the glass was turning to liquid as the beautiful blue and white light snapped across it.

Suddenly, there was a large opening in the glass. Looking through it, Soto could see the side of an ATV and the outside world. Flint stepped through the opening. Christiansen motioned the others to follow. As each man stepped through the open portal, he exited the underground briefing room and stepped out into the outside.

As soon as Christiansen came through, last of the four, the portal closed.

Flint proceeded to take off the brown uniform and dress in black and grey robes with armor hidden beneath. The change made him look much more like a Shifter, and a practitioner of the dark arts.

Henri headed into the ATV.

Soto saw that his Desert Fox hovercycle was buckled to the top rear of the ATV. They couldn't be too far from the hidden CS outpost if someone had brought it here.

Christiansen said to Soto, "Inside the ATV is some armor. I got you a set of armored Huntsman fatigues, in black, and a Lynx power armor. Just bought all this stuff from Northern Gun on our way down here. Also, some weapons if you want to complement that old L-20. I was told you prefer pistols, so I got you two new NG-PB713 particle beam pistols, along with a rifle. It's an NG-P7, a souped-up power rifle compared to that L-20. We'll head out in a few."

Soto nodded at Christiansen. "Thanks. Never seen or used any of those weapons or armor, but I'll get myself locked on with them. What's in the crate on top of the ATV?"

"That," Christiansen said with a smile, "is for our next mission. You'll see. Welcome to Derringer Cell."

Chapter Three

Soto felt uncomfortable as he walked around the rear cargo deck of a CS Death's Head Transport, trying to get used to the feel of leather armor. It fit well enough, he just felt strange in it.

Looking around at the mostly empty deck, he thought it was a good thing the crew had been ordered out of the cargo area for the flight. It looked like a mad crew of ex-Tolkeenites had infiltrated the cargo area.

Christiansen was decked out in traditional Ley Line Walker garb. He kept fidgeting with his robes. Every so often, he'd trip over the flowing robes and stumble.

Flint looked pleased to observe their discomfort. He kept suggesting that Christiansen hike up his robes and tie the belt around it tighter.

Dressed in his dark garb, Flint definitely looked his part. Of course, he was a real mage.

Henri sat sprawled out on a web seat. Wearing robes colored a deep red himself, he seemed fine. The Burster claimed he had gone undercover as a mage before. Content and chewing on jerky, he looked relaxed.

Soto was glad he wasn't wearing a robe, at least. His new outfit consisted of stolen demon leather armor. It seemed like normal leather armor from the Dark Ages, but was supposed to be able to withstand vast amounts of damage. The black cloak he wore was of a classified CS design. It was made of armored thread, much like his armored fatigues. It took on an alien look when worn with the leather armor. He had experimented with the strange blade pistol before the transport had taken off. It looked like a blade with a crude pistol grip, and had been taken from a class IV demon. There was an unknown number of shots left in it. He had two of the hellish pistols tucked into his leather belt.

Soto sat down and continued to wrap strips of leather around his L-20 rifle. They had assaulted the small demon city, blowing the main gate to bits to allow the CS forces to swoop in and attack. Derringer Cell had hit and run the demonic guards along the fortified walls, further softening up the enemy, and then disappeared into the night. Then they had rendezvoused with this Death's Head Transport, and now were off on another mission.

The demon pistols might be powerful, but Soto felt better knowing his L-20 would be along for the mission. The energy rifle was generic enough and definitely non-CS. He'd had it near ten years now. It had been rebuilt twice in that time, and now it was taking on a darker look, wrapped in leather with a tiny skull pendant clipped to its grip.

Both Henri and Christiansen were carting Techno-Wizard weapons, which Henri would be able to reload since he was a psychic. Christiansen was relying on pre-charged clips.

It turned out the cargo box on top of the ATV had held a bunch of magic weapons and armor. All stuff that belonged in the Coalition's Black Vault.

Flint stood up and made his way over to Soto, saying, "Well you look your part, soldier."

Soto nodded. "Thanks. I think."

Flint grabbed onto the webbing along the wall near Soto as the DHT banked hard to the right. The intercom chimed and they heard the pilot speak. "Hold on. Final approach, prepare for landing."

The others all filed to the rear of the transport deck and waited for the DHT to land. Soto followed them.

The Death's Head Transport didn't actually land; it hovered approximately 20 feet above the ground and the large bay doors opened.

Soto followed the others out the back hatch, rappelling down to the ground. The moment he touched down, the DHT lifted and soared back towards the east, presumably towards Lone Star. Soto wasn't exactly sure where they were.

Christiansen signaled to the others to follow him. Soto noted that they were following the Shifter and making their way towards the top of a nearby ridge. Even from here, Soto could see the glow of a Ley Line in the distance. Moving silently in the darkness of night, Derringer Cell advanced on the ridge.

Soto continued to bring up the rear and periodically checked back the way they had come from. Feeling uncomfortable following the mage, he let himself fall back some from the others. He kept them in sight, but he had an alarming sense of impending doom. Working with others was taking some getting used to. Soto stopped and quietly whistled to the others.

Christiansen and Flint set down the medium-sized cargo box they were carting towards the ridge. Flint smirked at Soto, and Christiansen looked angry as he jogged back towards Soto and whispered, "What?!"

Soto squatted down by the large outcrop of rocks next to him and quietly said, "Something feels wrong, Sir. I'm not sure exactly what it is. Something just doesn't feel right."

Christiansen opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by the loud laughter from Flint. Both men turned to look at the mage.

Henri stepped closer to Flint, little sparks of flames dancing on his fingertips, and said, "Wut's sah funny, mage?"

As Flint spoke, ignoring Henri, Soto realized he could see several sets of glowing red eyes all around them in the darkness.

Flint chuckled and said, "Captain Christiansen, I have to thank you. Both for trusting me to tag along with you on several exciting missions, and for this." Flint pointed at the cargo box.

Soto glanced around at the glowing red eyes in the night and muttered, "Surrounded."

If Christiansen heard him, he didn't react like it. The Captain took a step back towards Flint, saying, "You are betraying me, the CS, and the Vanguard, all for some stupid Techno-Wizard weapons in the box?"

Flint's smile was sinister and the Shifter shook his head. Soto pulled the three plasma grenades out of his pouch and

activated them. Setting the grenades down onto the rocky outcrop, he leaped over the rocks and ran back the way they had come from.

By Soto's best estimation, there were fewer glowing eyes back the way they had come from. He flipped the safety off his L-20 energy rifle and opened fire on the spot where he figured a body would be, right under a set of red eyes.

Soto heard a growl and dodged left. Rolling, he came back up to his feet with the L-20 pointed in the direction of the growl.

"Oh, crap!" Soto yelled when he saw the advancing forms of several Shadow Beasts. In the growing distance, he heard Flint saying something about the weapons being Greater Rune Weapons, not Techno-Wizard weapons.

Soto's internal cybernetic clock was counting down. He opened fire on the advancing Shadow Beasts, and then dropped to the ground at the last second.

The explosion of the three plasma grenades was deafening. The ground shook and Soto saw lightning crash down, striking Christiansen. The Shadow Beasts stopped running at Soto and looked towards the explosion.

Soto jumped up and ran for his life, crashing through trees and stumbling over rocks he ran as hard and as fast as he could.

As he ran, he could hear the Burster screaming in pain, Flint's laughter, and the Shadow Beasts chasing him.

Lightning continued to crash behind him and Soto ran like hell.

Chapter Four

As Cross walked through the door to the dingy old bar, a blast of cool air shot out, pushing the stench, smoke and ash of the City of Iron back outside. The CS City of Iron Heart was an industrial giant, its many factories and mines pumping a nonstop cloud of blackness up into the sky above the dirty city streets. The people of the City of Iron were proud members of the Coalition States. Supplying iron, nickel, copper, coal, and a bit of silver and gold to the CS war machine, the city was also known for producing power armor and military vehicles. The archaeological finds at Science North had been invaluable, and Iron Heart was the third largest CS city behind Free Quebec and Chi-Town.

Cross brushed snow and soot off his shoulders as he stood in front of the now closed door and looked around the bar. He had only been to this bar a few times before his wife had died, but over the last few months it has become his daily routine to swing by Jacque's Bar after work.

Cross's early years with the CS had been at Chi-Town. Born into an influential family, he had annoyed his father by becoming a CS Grunt instead of a Tech Officer. He had a commission as an Officer partially because of his father but as far as Cross was concerned, only he had earned his rank as a Major. After three years of being an Infantry Officer, and as a young Lieutenant, Cross had attended his younger sister's wedding where he met Rhianna. Rhianna Tremblay was a young scientist in Iron Heart, who worked on perfecting

weapons manufacturing and reviving Golden Age Technology. Most of it was well over his head, but she was beautiful and smart, and exactly who he wanted.

Cross got a transfer to the City of Iron, assigned to a Commando unit, and when he wasn't killing demons, mages or the Xiticix, he was home with Rhianna. Until a few months ago when she and the team of CS Special Forces assigned to protect her were killed at an archeological dig north of the city. Of the six scientists that had been with Rhianna, and the 22 Special Forces soldiers, only one Psi-Stalker and a Dog Boy had survived. Rhianna hadn't been able to have children and now Cross was alone with nothing but work and Jacque's Bar.

He tossed his field jacket at the coatrack, missed, and left his jacket crumpled on the ground next to the coatrack. Jacque's Bar was busy, as usual, and Cross wound his way through the patrons, between tables and chairs and laughter, and made his way up to the bar.

Sitting down on the stool at the bar, Cross looked at his reflection in the mirror in the wall adjacent him. He desperately needed a haircut. Probably should have shaved before work too. Since Rhianna had been murdered by demons he had stopped caring. He knew he was in a bad place. He knew he was letting himself go. But knowing you are not up to snuff and caring about it were two different things. For months he had been leading Commando units out on Xiticix raids. Normally, he would only be assigned to one raid a month but now he was pulling rank and going every day. No one was willing to say anything to him since they all knew he had just lost Rhianna. Cross's commanding officer had suggested he take a paid vacation and he had promised he would. Just after one more raid. That was a week of raids ago.

"I'm not suicidal. I just need to kill something," Cross muttered.

The pretty bartender was swirling a mixture of alcohol in a container and stopped to say, "What's that, Honey?"

Cross smiled apologetically at her and said, "Nothing, Miranda. I'm sorry. I'll just take my usual, please."

"Coming right up, Mr. Ronan Saint Cross. One Iron City Rum Blaster for my favorite regular." Miranda winked and smiled at him as she set about making his drink.

She placed his drink down in front of him and Cross said, "Another, please."

Miranda nodded solemnly and said, "Okay, Cross, but the manager has been getting on my case about giving you a free room, so make sure you can walk out of here tonight, Dear. Oh hey, your Psi-Stalker friend just came in. Looks like he's on duty still. I'll check on you in a little."

Cross nodded. "Thanks."

Turning around, he watched as a tall Psi-Stalker in full armor made his way straight towards him. The big white wolf, Ares, was a few feet behind the Iron Heart Peacekeeper. The Psi-Stalker and Psi-Hound ignored catcalls of "The Fuzz" and "Soul Eater" as they approached Cross.

The people of Iron Heart loved the CS and respected the Psi-Stalkers and Dog Boys who helped protect the City of Iron's population, but drunks were never happy to see the police.

"Damien, Ares," Cross said as a hello to the two Peacekeepers.

Damien finished removing his helmet and set it on the bar. Ares growled a friendly reply and saluted Cross.

Damien sat down next to Cross and said, "I'll be frank and to the point, Major Cross."

Cross laughed, "Okay, um, when aren't you, and I quote, 'to the point?' What's up, Damien? I didn't think I'd see you until this weekend."

Damien nodded. "Yeah, I don't really talk to people much, not outside of work anyway. You're the exception, Sir. Look, Cross, Ares and I have been doing Peacekeeper duty ever since our SF team was killed, along with Rhianna and the others, leaving just us. I started asking around about how much longer it was going to be until we were inserted into a new SF team. Well, I got my answer today."

Damien took the untouched, second drink that Cross had ordered, and drained it in one gulp.

Cross drank some of his own original drink and eyed the big Psi-Stalker. After the loss of Rhianna, he had gotten to know Damien and Ares. They were good guys. Cross didn't blame them at all for Rhianna, knowing they had both done all that was possible.

"So? Is it good news, Damien? You and Ares off with a new SF team? Is this a goodbye?" Cross asked.

Damien sat quietly. Ares stepped closer to Cross, saying, "You need a purpose, Major. A reason. I understand. I have lost so many fellow Psi-Hounds and human friends in my time with the CS. They were all soldiers at least and knew the risks that come with soldiering. What happened to Rhianna is unfair. In the Tolkeen war, both Damien and I saw so many comrades killed by mages and monsters it's hard to know how to handle the emotions that come after the loss."

Cross sat open mouthed and stared at Ares. Damien grunted.

Ares continued, "I never had a wife, Sir. Never had a love. Just damn good friends. Damien, others, and I dare say, you Sir have become a good friend to me. I'm not trying to upset you Major, I just think you need a direction. A way to channel your anger until you can move past it. Damien and I got a new job. One we think you might be into. You have an excellent combat record. Yes. We've both seen your record, Sir. You are a damn fine Commando. We think you'd be an asset to our new gig. We suggested you to her. The woman who came to tell us about our new job. She's interested in meeting you, Sir."

Cross shut his mouth and rubbed at his temples.

Damien said, "You know, between the two of us, Ares is better at talking than me. I second what he said. I think you'll like the job. Interested?"

Cross said, "What job, exactly? You haven't said anything about what the job is."

Damien grinned, showing his sharp teeth and snorted.

Ares said, "Better to let Celeste tell you the job parameters. She's the one you need to ask. Damien and I, along with Celeste and two others, are headed out tonight as a new, special team, Cross. You should come along. Come see Celeste."

Damien stood up and placed his helmet back on, saying, "Trust me, Cross. You'll be interested."

Cross raised an eyebrow and nodded, "Okay, lead on, fellows."

Ares turned to follow Damien out of the bar, with Cross following him. As they headed out, Ares said, "Oh and Cross, Celeste is a little scary. She's got a bunch of tattoos and a hard look about her. Apparently, she was a slave in Atlantis for several years prior to making her way back to the CS. Try not to stare at her when we meet her, okay? Damien says she is pretty but she scares me a little."

Cross made a face and wondered who in the hell could scare Ares, a huge Wolf Hound.

Chapter Five

Whitefish Falls was south of the City of Iron. Heavily forested and under a thin blanket of snow its main features were its proximity to Lake Huron, the small fortified CS outpost and Wheelers Antiques and Variety Store.

"What's here, Mosin?" asked Celeste.

Mosin grunted, "Don't blink, you'll miss it."

Celeste looked out of the front windows of the ATV. "Miss what?" she said.

Mosin laughed, "The beautiful landscape. I might have pretty much carte blanche to run this team as I see fit but I'm not about to head into Iron Heart itself with a mage in the ATV."

Celeste snorted, "You mean me or the guy in our passenger compartment?"

Mosin nodded as he steered the big ATV around a group of CS Grunts jogging along the side of the old, partially paved road. They passed a big white building which read "Wheelers."

Mosin continued driving and said, "We are almost there. There is a command post up ahead. We'll stop there and I'll check in. See if I can relay a message to Iron Heart and have our potential new team members come meet us here."

Mosin pulled the big ATV over onto the shoulder to allow a convoy of six CS hover tanks to pass. Looking out of the clear glass, he waved at the top gunner on one of the tanks. The Psi-Stalker looked at Mosin and Celeste as the tank slid by.

Celeste forced a smile onto her face as she looked back at the Psi-Stalker tank gunner. "We look like Lazlo mages rolling up in a Techno-Wizard ATV flying CS flags. If that Psi-Stalker smells Flint or me, we're in trouble."

Mosin nodded his head and said, "I'm also transmitting a beacon identifying ourselves as Coalition Special Forces just like the flags flying over the top of the ATV suggest. The authentication codes are current so we should be okay."

Celeste muttered, "Tell me again why you are leaving me to interview the Wild Psi-Stalker."

Mosin smiled, "Yea. Make sure you record the interview."

Celeste turned to look at Mosin. She used her hand to brush her long black hair out of her face. "So you can watch and laugh later? Sure thing, Sir. Leave me, smelling of magic,

alone with that Wild Psi-Stalker, Damien, and his friend the big, white, wolf Psi-Hound. Mage killers. I don't want to be ripped into pieces like they did to those Xiticix."

Mosin said, "Those tattoos you picked up as a captive in Atlantis don't make you a mage, Celeste. Don't use any of them when you're talking to them and they shouldn't sense anything. You'll be fine. I trust you. I can't have the Shifter, Flint, interview them. He's not really part of this team. He's temporary. Flint gets to sit in the ATV until we leave. I have to go check on some intel with the Brown Water Navy guys."

Celeste shifted in her seat.

Mosin continued, "Look. You are a young Military Specialist with unique experience. You can't go back into service with those tattoos but you can be a valuable member of Reaper Cell. You. Me. A borrowed mage. I want a few more people on the team. I already read the reports on Damien and Ares. They're good to go. Just make sure they aren't stupid or damaged goods after their last encounter. Hell. Ask them if they know anyone else that might be of value to us and I'll get them quietly transferred to Reaper Cell. After that we can sit down together and I'll fill you all in on our first mission."

* * *

Celeste nodded, "Okay. He sounds like he could be a good addition to our team."

Celeste placed the Commando's Service Record down into the desk in front of her.

She looked at Damien then Ares, "Tragic story but he sounds like a good tactician and an open-minded guy. Bring me Major Ronan Saint Cross and I'll talk to him."

Damien nodded.

Ares said, "Yes Ma'am. We will collect him this evening and be back here tonight. Thank you."

As they left the room, Celeste found herself staring at the tattoo of a scorpion on her arm. The nightmares would probably never go away. The tattoos had frightened her at first. Now she felt like she was getting used to them being there on her skin. She was so glad that unlike some of the other slaves and captives that she had been housed with on Atlantis, no tattoos had actually been put on her face. As long as she dressed in long sleeves and pants, she could conceal their presence. As long as she didn't activate the tattoos, their magical abilities were undetectable. Probably. But after she had managed to escape from the City of Splynn, due to help from a group called the Liberated Underground, she had returned to the CS and undergone medical and psychological exams. Deemed fit of mind, other than normal trauma from being held captive, it didn't matter. The tattoos meant her military career was over.

Working in the 'Burbs, in essence excommunicated from the fortified city of Chi-Town, had been hard. Her skills were military based. Working at the Cyber Clinic had sucked but put food on her plate. Being a secretary to that old, half insane Cyber Doc had been unpleasant. Thankfully, Mosin had shown up looking for her after a few weeks. At least this way she was actually serving the CS again.

* * *

Mosin wasn't back yet. She had taken some food out to the mage in the ATV. Flint had grumbled and complained about being stuck in the ATV. He gave her the creeps the way the large muscular Shifter eyed her. Like he knew something about her that she didn't know. She hadn't stayed long.

Sitting in the commandeered office, inside the small CS outpost, she toyed with the pencils on the desk and waited for Damien and Ares to return with the CS Commando.

Celeste flipped through Cross's Service Record again. He was 45 years old. Twenty years her senior. Mosin was 49. Damien 42. Ares was something like 20. Smiling, she thought, "Old guys."

Sighing, Celeste was just about to get up and take a walk outside when there was a knock on the office door.

"Come," she said, sitting back down at the desk.

The door opened and a young Grunt stepped in. "Your men are back. They're headed up from Security now."

Celeste nodded her thanks and the Grunt left, shutting the door after himself. A few minutes later there was another knock on the door.

Again, she called out, "Come."

The door opened and the CS Commando Major entered. Celeste watched Cross as he took in the room, her, and then stepped in further to stand directly in front of the desk she sat at. She looked at Cross. He needed a haircut and a shave. He was dressed in an old CS field jacket and fatigue pants. No armor. No weapons as far as she could tell. He shifted his stance some to allow himself to both see her and the room's door. Celeste recognized what he was doing. Her father had been an ISS Specter and had always been "ready for anything."

Celeste reflected inwardly, "I bet when he goes out to dinner he has to sit where he can see the door. He appraises the fellow patrons and knows all the exits."

Cross said, "Damien and Ares didn't say what your rank was, Ma'am. Don't know if I need to salute you or not."

Celeste stood up and walked over to Cross offering her hand. Cross shook her hand as she said, "We don't use rank in this team Mr. Saint Cross. I was a Lieutenant, so you outrank me, Major. But like I said, we don't use rank. Mosin is in charge of Reaper Cell and he'll be back soon. I'm Celeste Harrison."

Cross nodded. "Ronan Saint Cross, as I guess you already know." Cross glanced at his Service Record on the desk behind Celeste and continued, "Reaper Cell? Sounds ominous. Is this one of those 'I'm in or I'm dead' interviews?"

Celeste smiled and returned to the other side of her commandeered desk.

"No, Cross. You can opt out. Go back to fighting the Xitix with your Commando unit. Go on as things have been, as long as you swear your silence on what you learn here tonight. Of course, you might find friendly fire to be troublesome when you go back. I don't know. I'm almost as new to this thing as you are," Celeste stated.

Cross returned her smile. "Well, then. Why don't you fill me in?"

Celeste nodded and said, "Mosin was an RCSG and Intelligence Officer. He was handpicked by Colonel Lyboc and

Joseph Prosek to run this Cell. Mosin picked me, Damien and Ares to join his Cell. The three of us were suggested to Mosin by Colonel Lyboc. You are the only one not picked by higher-ups. Mosin told me he wanted someone cool under fire who would be willing to go on potentially one-way missions. Someone crazy enough to do what we are going to be doing but not crazy suicidal."

Cross heard himself saying for the second time this night, "I'm not suicidal. Just want to kill some bad guys, demons and the like."

Celeste nodded and said, "Well, we will be doing that. Killing the enemies of the CS. Here on North America, other places around the globe. Maybe even not here on Earth." As she talked, she watched for Cross's reactions but he just stood there and listened. Continuing, she said, "We will be employing non-conventional weapons and tactics. You think you can stomach working with magic users, either by forcing them to open portals for us or occasionally working alongside mages?"

Cross pointed at Celeste's arm, saying, "Damien said you had a bunch of tattoos. See a few there on your arm. Ares is somewhat scared of you. Intimidated. They mentioned you were captured by Atlantean Slavers at some point and you obviously escaped from Atlantis. A few years ago, my Commando unit fought and killed a bunch of Slave Barge Demon things. We fought those Blind Warrior Women, a bizarre looking, fleshy cyborg-like creature, and a guy who looked human enough other than he was covered head to toe in tattoos."

Cross took a breath and smiled at Celeste.

"I cannot imagine what it was like being captured by those demons. Or what it took to escape. Your tattoos are magic, aren't they? You touch them and unspoken spells are cast? I'm sure that made it hard to get back in uniform and rejoin your fellow Military Specialists. No one probably came right out and said it to you but the CS are scared of you. Early retirement? Sounds like this unofficial Cell is perfect for you. Look, I like being a Commando. I'm good at it. Iron Heart has grown on me, originally being from Chi-Town, I.H. is my home now."

Celeste was about to say something but Cross continued, "Having said that, I'm ready to move on to the next thing. I'm yours if you'll take me. I've heard rumors in the Officers' Mess. I have an idea what is going on. I hear SF officers mutter about teams of unconventional Cells, rogue ex-CS soldiers doing anything it takes to seek retribution on the enemies of the CS. If even a tenth of it is true, yup; I'm in."

Celeste smiled.

Chapter Six

Flint paced back and forth in the small passenger area of the ATV. Anger consumed his thoughts. So used to being able to Rift wherever he liked, able to open portals and summon demonic minions, he felt like a caged animal in the ATV. This was stupid. He had the box of Rune Weapons. He had done as he was asked. Infiltrate the Vanguard. Join them. Do their bidding. Get them to trust him. He had been working for those

small-minded mages for four years now. Not always understanding what he was doing it for, but eager to please his master. He kept his mind on the power he would have imparted to him once he succeeded. Finally, he had been instructed to retrieve the box of Rune Weapons. He was told he could have them all except a Silver Short Sword which his master desired. All these years to steal a silver sword from the CS Black Vault. Patience and planning and a lot of assistance from his master led him to here and now. He had the Rune Sword.

After unleashing his Shadow Beasts upon the members of Derringer Cell he had fled with the box. Running down to the Ley Line near where he had sprung his trap, he opened a small communication Rift to speak to his master. Ready to dimensionally teleport into his master's realm. The small dimensional universe was designed by his master, Flint knew of no way to open a portal to the universe without his master allowing it. It was a neat trick. One he was promised to be taught. That and a long list of dark spells.

It had been a long, frustrating haul. First, the Vanguard. Then the CS. Now he was done. He should have been allowed to return to his master's universe. If only he had kept his mouth shut. While speaking to his master via the communications Rift, he had been asked what else he knew of the CS plans for their new disavowed cells.

Flint had grown impatient with his master. Why wasn't it allowing him to portal to it to talk? Why keep him here on Earth asking him questions? He was worried. The former CS Ranger named Soto might have escaped his Shadow Beasts. If the man had, Soto might circle back and attack him. Impatient, Flint had demanded to be allowed access to his master's universe, saying that there was really nothing else of importance involving the CS. The CS had asked him to open a portal to Lord Dunscon's City of Brass. But even though he was able to do it, there was no way he was going to. Because he was coming home to his master with the silver sword.

Flint punched the interior wall of the passenger area. "Damn it! Why didn't I keep my mouth shut? How could I have known my master hated Lord Dunscon so much?"

Flint recalled the agonizing screech his master had made. The sensation of hatred bled through the small Rift, overwhelming Flint. He had dropped to his knees into the dirt and pressed his palms to his ears as tight as he could. After what felt like an eternity, Flint wiped blood from his nose and shook his head.

Flint heard his master speak into his mind, "You will not lose my blessed Rune Sword. If you lose Herjaza I will kill you a thousand times over, Shifter. Hold onto her. After you take the CS to the City of Brass, I will allow you entry to my realm. Let the CS wreak havoc upon the foul Lord of the Federation. I will grant you all I promised and I will extend your life."

Sitting down onto the dusty couch in the passenger area, Flint muttered, "What choice do I have? None. Come on! Let's go. Come on, Mosin. Get your pathetic team of idiots assembled and let's go. I'll get you to the City of Brass and then leave you there to die. I'll get these Rune Weapons to my

master and as I am rewarded I will laugh at how many Coalition soldiers I have killed!"

* * *

Mosin turned off the remote spy camera. He had his answers. They were worse than he had feared.

Mosin had told Celeste he was following up on intel he was getting from the CS Navy but in fact he had been sitting in the room above the one Celeste was using. He had cameras and audio surveillance set up on both the room Celeste was in, in order to watch her interviews, and had set up a secret spy camera within the passenger area of the ATV to watch Flint as the mage sat alone, waiting for them to return.

Mosin leaned back in the office chair and kicked his feet up to rest on the desk in front of him. If he had learned anything from a career in Intelligence and being stationed at the RCSG base in St. Louis it was, don't trust anyone, especially a mage.

Any mages he employed in the future would be shackled and gagged. Dragged out to Nexus points and given the choice of doing what he wanted or being shot in the head. He was going to need to start capturing some mages.

Mosin briefly considered messaging Colonel Lyboc and telling him the news. Or his new commander, Colonel Hunter. "Screw that," he said.

Mosin knew he was a better commander than either of those Colonels. He would make his own choice on what to do.

Mosin rewound the video recording of Celeste talking to Cross. He watched the last part again. For a wild card in their team, Cross looked promising. The Major had known right off what Celeste's tattoos were. Mosin wanted a wild card. Someone not picked by his commanders. Someone who wouldn't be a potential betrayer. Mosin didn't think Celeste or Damien would end up betraying him. Nor the big Wolf. But you never could tell. He himself had double-crossed many people who, to this day, still denied it could have been him.

Mosin zoomed the camera in on the desk Celeste had been using. She had left with Cross about ten minutes ago. Mosin used the camera to read the note she had written and left in the desk. It read: Back in an hour. Gone to the Officers' Mess to eat with the new guy. His name is Major Ronan Saint Cross, Commando.

"Guard!" Mosin yelled.

The CS Grunt standing guard outside his commandeered room came in quickly. Saluting Mosin, who was wearing both a Special Forces pin and full Colonel rank pins on his uniform, the soldier said, "How may I help you Sir?"

Mosin wrote a note and handed it to the Grunt, saying, "Put this note on the lady interrogator's desk downstairs. Don't bother looking for her but let your men know that when she returns, I want the man named Cross sent up here to see me. Got it?"

The Grunt took the note, saluted the Colonel and barked, "Yes, Sir!"

* * *

Celeste and Cross finished their dinner. They exited the small outpost Officers Mess and saw that Damien and Ares were waiting for them. The four of them walked back to the administration building where they were greeted by the guards located at the entrance to the building.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," the guard in charge said to Celeste.

Celeste stopped and nodded to the man, "Yes, Sergeant?"

The guard stated, "Your commanding officer, Colonel Michaels, requested I pass a message on to you."

Celeste raised an eyebrow. Mosin had promoted himself it sounded like. He had told her he was assuming a fake name while they were here. She knew he was going by Michaels but hadn't realized he was impersonating a Colonel.

Celeste nodded, "Let's hear it."

The Guard stated, "You are all to, respectfully, return to your captured Special Forces ATV and wait for the Colonel to meet you there. The officer named Cross is to report to the fourth floor of this building, to room 415 and report to the Colonel."

Celeste frowned but said, "Thank you."

Cross shrugged, waved to the others and went inside.

Celeste, Damien and Ares crossed the street to their ATV.

Cross made his way up to room 415. As he walked towards the room he put his hands into his pockets of the dingy old CS field jacket. He had cut out the interior years ago, allowing him to look like he was putting his hands into his pockets when in fact he was able to hold onto the handle of his concealed energy pistol.

Cross knew he was being paranoid but didn't care. With his hands stuffed in his jacket pockets, he held his energy pistol in his right hand and held a flash bang in his left hand. As he walked up to the closed door of room 415, he said to the guard standing next to the door, "Cross. Here to see the Colonel."

The guard nodded. Knocked once on the door and opened it to allow Cross to enter. Cross entered the room and the guard closed the door behind him.

Looking around the room, Cross saw Mosin sitting at the desk. Mosin was a well-groomed man around fifty Cross guessed. Cross looked about at the many monitors and saw that they showed the room downstairs where Celeste had talked to him. He could also see the team entering into an ATV passenger area where they were greeting a man dressed in dark robes. Cross frowned. Then looked back at Mosin.

Mosin said, "So, you are willing to leave everything behind. To be disavowed by the CS. To work with us as we work out the kinks of being a nonexistent group dedicated to the Coalition. Our tactics and methods will be unlike anything the CS has ever done before. Our guidelines and rules are a murky mess right now; we are figuring things out as we go."

Mosin tapped his fingers on the desk and said, "Reaper Cell is a Reprisal Team. We don't exist officially, of course, but we are needed and we will follow the enemies of mankind to the ends of the earth and beyond in order to strike back at those who thought that they could beleaguer the CS and escape untouched. Most of the time, as team leader, I'm going to be the only one that actually knows the full details regarding the

objectives and parameters of the missions that we are sent on. What do you think of all this, Major Cross?"

Cross slowly twirled the flash bang with the fingers of his left hand. Then stopped, not wanting to give away he was holding it.

Cross smiled and said, "I think you suspect a traitor amongst your team. I think that your entire team was given to you. I think that you made a point of having me assigned to your group because I wasn't picked by your commanding officers. You found a semi-random way to have me be part of this Reaper Cell. I think you need more structure even as a rogue cell and you need to be firm, fair but ruthless in your dealings with your own team members and the enemies of the Coalition States. Using magic against magic sounds plausible, but I think you need to be more devious in the application of using said magic against magic. Your pet mage," Cross pointed at the monitor showing the inside of the ATV, "should be chained and forced to do your bidding, not running free. I think you must have spent some time either in Intelligence or as an ISS Specter and I think you knew I would draw these conclusions after seeing your little setup here."

Mosin laughed. "Damn, Major. Perceptive. Good. Yes, we do have a traitor. I need you to do something dangerous for me. Sit down. Let's talk."

Chapter Seven

Damien, Ares and Flint sat in the rear passenger area of the ATV surrounded by an uncomfortable silence. Celeste was outside waiting for Mosin and Cross. Every so often, Damien would growl. Ares understood the Psi-Stalker's mood; they were both fighting the very nature of their beings. Both Damien and Ares could sense the presence of magic from the Shifter. Ares wanted to kill the mage. Damien wanted to kill the Shifter and feed off Flint's energy. Ares was doing a much better job at hiding his feelings than Damien was. For his part, Flint was whistling and snobbishly flipping through a copy of CS Warrior, a photo-based magazine detailing the many ways to combat magic. Every so often, Flint would shake his head and say, "No, no, no, that doesn't work."

Ares rolled his eyes and Damien growled again.

Outside, Celeste was watching a group of CS Grunts across the street who were packing boxes into a Spider-Skull Walker. Several Skelebots were on patrol, walking along the street. She felt both happy to be back amongst her fellow CS troopers and sad. Sad that she would never be able to interact with a regular squad of troops. Working with Major Mike Mosin and his team of disavowed was the best she would ever get now that her body had been transformed by the monsters on Atlantis. Leaning back against the ATV, she sighed.

"Cheer up, Celeste," Cross said as he walked towards her. "You look glum. We are about to head out and do the good work that needs to be done." Cross was toting a large, black duffel bag. Dressed in old-style CS armor from the waist down, he had an old, black Juicer plate chest piece on over a

sleeveless T-shirt. His old beat up field jacket was draped over the duffel bag.

Celeste forced a smile onto her face and said, "Got all your worldly possessions in the bag?"

Cross nodded, "Yep. Everything I own." Dropping the bag down next to the ATV, Cross stepped closer to Celeste, "Sounds like Mosin is getting a SAMAS Power Armor for you to fly. Cool, huh? I was trained on the SAM about ten years ago but haven't been in one since training."

Celeste nodded, "Been about a year since I last used one. Last time was when I got shot down and captured. Hopefully, I'll have better luck this mission." Celeste looked at Cross's bare left upper arm and at the old tattoo there. Two faded letters were tattooed there, RC. Pointing at Cross's arm, Celeste asked, "Your initials?"

Cross frowned, saying, "No. I mean yeah but, no; the RC stands for Rhianna Cross."

Cross said, "Mosin will fill us all in but it sounds like we are supposed to head out to a Nexus point close by and Flint will open a portal for us to the Federation of Magic. Straight into the elusive City of Brass. Sounds like a hit and run tactic and we will be doing as much destruction as possible there before bugging out. Supposed to record as much data as we can too. I guess Flint is familiar with how to get there. I'm still trying to wrap my brain around working with a mage. Mosin told me about some cadre of mages who call themselves the Vanguard. Seems like a bunch of hogwash to me, pro-Coalition mages."

Celeste laughed, "Yeah. I've heard rumors of the Vanguard. Back when I was in Chi-Town doing Military Intelligence work. Seemed unlikely. But I've had my eyes opened to a bunch of things that seemed unlikely that turned out to be real." Celeste shrugged.

Celeste looked at Cross's tattoo again then away from Cross and said, "I'm sorry about your wife. I saw the vid recording of that battle. There were so many Xiticix."

Cross picked up the duffel bag, slinging it over his shoulder. "Thanks. I'll be inside."

As Cross entered the ATV, Mosin arrived in a cargo van, waived Celeste over and pointed at the CS Special Forces SAMAS located in the van.

Celeste helped Mosin get the SAM out of the van. After she suited up into the Power Armor, she saw that Mosin was pointing at several medium crates.

Mosin said, "Please put these on top of the ATV."

Celeste lifted the boxes to the top of the ATV with relative ease due to her now augmented strength. Celeste asked, "What are these boxes full of, Mosin?"

Mosin shrugged, "You know. I may have swung by the armory and gotten a few toys. They're for later. You'll see."

* * *

Close to midnight, the ATV came to a halt some 200 feet away from a Nexus point. Celeste hovered off the ground in the Power Armor nearby.

Cross watched out the front window of the ATV as they approached the Nexus. The night sky was illuminated by the

Ley Lines which crossed here. Everything took on an eerie blue glow from the lines of power. If not for the Nexus point it would have been pitch black out since the stars were obscured by clouds.

Cross got out of the passenger seat, tucked his C-20 energy pistol into his leg holster and started disassembling the TX-5 pump pistol he had borrowed from Mosin.

Mosin stepped around Cross, saying, "Good luck," and moved down into the passenger area of the ATV. Louder, Mosin said, "OK people, look alive!"

Cross stepped down into the passenger area behind Mosin. The TX-5 was partially disassembled now.

Mosin said, "Stand by. Damien, open the hatch, would you? Thanks."

Mosin stood in the hatch opening and looked back at the others, "Give me a moment. I'll let you know when to come out." Stepping outside, Mosin slowly walked towards the Nexus point.

Like the undead raising up, 16 Skelebots stood up, clumps of dirt and grass falling off them and advanced on Mosin. The closest Skelebot stated, "Identify."

Mosin said, "I am CS Major Thomas, Special Forces Commander, authentication Adam 55 Delta 66. Here are my orders."

Mosin held out an electronic data chip for the Skelebot to take. Reaching out to take the chip, the robot kept its energy rifle trained on Mosin. Mosin tried not to be nervous since all 16 Skelebots were pointing their rifles at him or the ATV.

A few moments later, the Skelebot stated, "Copy orders."

Mosin watched as the 16 robots walked away from the Nexus. Having coded the data chip himself, he knew that they would go one mile away from the Nexus for four hours before returning.

Mosin pounded on the side of the ATV and took a few steps closer to the bright blue and white Nexus. Celeste landed on the ground next to him.

Damien opened the hatch again and stepped outside. As the others started to follow Damien, Cross exclaimed, "Damn it!" as the spring of the TX-5 flew across the passenger area and landed somewhere on the floor near the back.

"Brilliant," said Flint as he shook his head and stepped out of the ATV to look at the Nexus.

Ares said, "I'll help you find it."

Cross smiled and said, "It's okay, Ares. I think I saw where it landed. I got it. Cover the others. I'll be right behind you."

Ares shrugged and hefted the CP-50 Dragonfire energy rifle up and went outside.

* * *

They all watched as Flint laid out a circle of small stones and explained he could open the portal to the City of Brass without doing a ritual but if they wanted to keep the portal open for a while, in order to have it as an escape route, he might as well perform the ritual.

No one was really listening as the Shifter explained to them the intricate mysteries of opening a dimensional por-

tal. Damien kept making faces at Flint when the mage wasn't looking. The others, bored, tried to not laugh.

Mosin stood next to Cross and said, "You OK? Your nose is bleeding."

Cross nodded curtly, wiped his nose with the back of his hand and quietly said, "It's fine. I'll be right back."

Louder, Cross said, "Geez. I gotta piss." Cross walked around the back of the ATV and grabbed up his duffel bag. Hefting it up onto his shoulder, he labored to carry it out into the woods behind the ATV. After several minutes, Cross dropped the duffel bag to the ground unceremoniously and flinched at the orchestra of horror which raged through his mind.

Kicking the bag, he quietly hissed, "Shut up." Holding his hands to his head, he groaned.

Emptying the duffel bag onto the ground he was careful not to touch the contents. Picking up a small CS field shovel, Cross started digging a hole. He worked quickly, wanting to be done with it.

After the shallow hole was dug, he used the shovel to tip the contents of the bag into the hole. For a few minutes, the pain in his head and the insulting voices lapsed in volume. Cross stared at a silver short sword and said, "I don't know. I'll end up regretting it, I'm sure."

* * *

Cross moved to stand next to Celeste, who was still in the SAMAS power armor, her rail gun pointed at the Nexus. Damien and Ares faced away from the others and watched the perimeter and glanced back occasionally at the others. Mosin looked at Cross who nodded at him.

Flint stood up and brushed dirt off his knees. Turning to look at Mosin, Flint said, "I'm ready to open your portal the City of"

Flint trailed off and didn't finish his sentence when he saw Mosin pointing the energy pistol at him.

With a look of surprise on his face, Flint started to say, "Acba Sorn Ra," and then gagged.

Celeste said, "What the hell?" as she saw Cross shove the barrel of his C-20 energy pistol into Flint's open mouth. She flinched, seeing that the big barrel of the pistol should not have fit into the mage's mouth but somehow, Cross had made it fit.

Blood leaked out of the corners of Flint's mouth as Mosin stepped closer to the mage with a look of hatred. Flint gagged and Cross held him still. Mosin said, "Traitorous scum magic user!"

Celeste asked, "What's going on?"

Damien and Ares had scooted back over to the rest, having seen Cross and Mosin attack Flint.

Damien laughed hard, saying, "Page 24 works!"

Ares explained, "In the magazine in the ATV, CS Warrior, page 24 talks about shutting a mage up by gagging them so they can't speak or cast spells."

Celeste said, "Okay, so page 24 works, but why are we gagging the Shifter who is about to open a portal for us?"

Cross stood quietly, pressing the pistol into Flint's mouth.

Mosin said, "Screw the City of Brass. We'll find a way there another time. It turns out that our Vanguard, the pro-CS mage, isn't quite so pro-CS."

Flint tried saying something and gagged again.

Mosin stood directly in front of Flint and pulled the Shifter's large dagger out of the mage's belt. Looking at the blade, Mosin pushed the tip against Flint's neck and said, "The only real reason that we stayed in the outpost for so long was so that I could watch the hidden security cameras inside of the ATV's passenger area. Our good mage friend here had some interesting things to rant about out loud. How he killed the last CS team he was working with. How he is a servant of some horrible supernatural creature. How he infiltrated the Vanguard in order to retrieve some magic weapons for his master."

Flint looked like he was having a hard time breathing and was turning red. Cross said, "Listen very carefully to me, Flint. I am going to remove the pistol from your mouth. If I hear anything at all sounding like a spell being cast, I'll shoot you in the head. Got it?"

Flint weaved about unsteadily, slowly suffocating, and nodded yes vigorously.

With a grinding sound of metal on teeth, Cross pulled the pistol quickly out of Flint's mouth. Several teeth fell to the ground and Flint choked and gagged, coughing blood. Breathing heavily, Flint dropped to his knees.

Cross flicked his C-20 back and forth to get the blood off it and then wiped the gun clean using Flint's cloak.

Mosin grabbed the back of Flint's neck, pulling his head upward as he leaned down to look the Shifter in the eyes, "You are going to open a portal for us. Not to the City of Brass but to this pocket dimensional place where your master is."

Flint sobbed, then cleared his throat. Sounding angry, Flint said, "I can't open a portal there."

Mosin grinned, "Yes, I know that, but you can open that little portal thing to communicate with your master and tell the thing that you sent us to the Federation of Magic. Then it will open the portal for you. Isn't that right, traitor?"

Flint said, "And then what? You're all going to go through the portal and, what, attack my master? That is laughable; you'll be torn to shreds by his might." Flint actually laughed until Mosin pressed the dagger harder against the Shifter's throat.

Mosin growled, "How about you just worry about your part in this, Flint. Make contact. Get the creature you call master to open the portal. We'll do our thing. Maybe I will let you live."

Flint shook his head. "Insane. No way will you let me go. If I do this for you, you will just kill me. But you can't. You don't understand the first thing about how this works. If the master opens a portal, it will close the moment after I step through. If you want a way back, you'll have to keep me here on this side of the portal, alive. Not that it really matters because the master will kill you all. This isn't exactly normal Rifting; the master created the dimension in which he lives."

Celeste said, "So we aren't going to the Federation of Magic. We are going to kill some creature instead? Can we kill it, just the four of us? I mean, someone will have to stay here and watch Flint, right?"

Flint laughed. “Your weapons will do nothing to the master.”

Mosin nodded, “Right then, so CS weapons, human technology, can’t hurt it. What can?”

Flint weakly smiled, still in pain, and wiped blood from his mouth. “Only magic can. You’re screwed. Celeste is the only one of you who has limited magic and she is scared to use it.”

Mosin said, “Look, Celeste. If we stop Flint, great. But if we destroy the creature that sent him, even better. The thing has to die. It can continue to create havoc for us and the CS if we don’t stop it and Flint.”

Cross re-holstered his C-20 and leaned down to whisper in Flint’s ear, “Make contact now.”

Flint said, “Fine, it’s your funeral. I’ll make contact.”

Mosin held the blade against Flint’s neck and said, “No funny business, start communicating. Get the thing to open the portal.”

Mosin kept the dagger firmly pressed against Flint’s throat.

Cross signaled to Damien and Ares to watch the Nexus.

Turning to look at Celeste, Cross said, “Can you please go get those crates that are attached to the top of the ATV and set them down right here next to the Nexus? We are going to need the things inside of them.”

Flint twisted the space in front of him, crafting a small, open portal into existence.

Cross shook his head and adjusted his duffel bag on his shoulder. Watching the little tear in reality was dizzying. Cross focused on Flint instead, watching the Shifter to make sure he didn’t try anything.

The voice that reached out through the small Rift spoke to Flint.

“You sent the soldiers to attack the City of Brass?” The words sounded like fingernails drawn across a chalk board. Ares staggered then righted himself. Damien poked his fingers into his ears and made a horrible face.

Celeste groaned and Mosin shook in pain.

Only Cross and Flint were unaffected by the voice.

Flint saw Cross pointing the C-20 at him and frowned. Flint looked back at the small Rift and said, “Yes, my master. They are gone now. Please allow me entry to your great dimension.”

After a moment of silence, the creature’s voice scratched their ears and said, “Bring me Herjaza, Flint. I smell her.”

Flint looked at Mosin. Mosin still looked unsteady but had the knife pointed at Flint.

“Yes, master,” said Flint.

The Nexus opened up with a flurry of rippling energy. A portal about the size of a man flared open, revealing darkness on the other side.

Celeste picked up the heavy crates and advanced on the portal. Carefully, she leaned over and stepped through the entrance of the portal and disappeared into the darkness.

Mosin motioned with his free hand at Damien and Ares. They quickly followed Celeste, jumping into the portal.

Cross still held the C-20 energy pistol pointed at Flint’s head. Mosin nodded his head at Cross, signaling for the Commando to go. Frowning, Cross backed towards the portal, keeping his pistol trained on Flint.

Right as Cross was about to step back into the darkness which was surrounded by bluish and white crackling energy, Flint yelled, “It’s a trap, master!”

Mosin stepped towards Flint, attempting to stab the Shifter. Flint twisted his body to the right, stepped to the left and slammed his big left fist into Mosin’s face. The dagger stabbed out at where Flint had been and Mosin’s head snapped backwards from the punch.

Flint slapped his open right palm down onto Mosin’s wrist. Stepping into Mosin, Flint wrestled his hand downwards. Mosin tried to pull back from the Shifter and was surprised how strong the mage was.

Flint pulled hard, pulling Mosin forward some, then suddenly stopped and allowed Mosin to pull them both backwards. Using Mosin’s momentum, Flint stepped even closer to him and grabbed Mosin’s right wrist with both of his hands. Flint shoved hard, twisting Mosin’s arm down and towards the man.

Mosin grunted as he started to lose his balance now that Flint had stopped pulling. With a sick realization, Mosin’s eyes opened wide.

Cross was torn. Staying here he could attack the mage. Mosin was dead: maybe he didn’t realize it yet, but he was finished. The dagger was stabbed into the man’s neck. The rest of the team was already through the Rift.

Cross muttered, “I can see the portal is closing! I’m trying to shoot Flint first, you impatient sword.”

Flint was using the dying Mosin as a shield. Deciding Mosin was dead anyway, Cross started to pull the trigger of the C-20.

With a surreal blink, Flint disappeared. Cross fell backwards into the darkness as the portal closed.

Chapter Eight

Cross swore. Over his long career with the CS, Cross had many times fought creatures or magic users that had stepped through a Rift. Never had he considered he might one day step through a Rift himself.

Other than the initial split second charged feeling he had as he tumbled backwards into the closing portal, it felt kind of anticlimactic. It was dark. He felt the dirt covered ground beneath him but other than knowing he was sitting down, he had no idea what was happening around him.

Words spoke into his mind, from the silver sword. Once again, he felt bizarrely out of sorts having the Rune Sword in his possession. It was still in his duffel bag and was telling him in its sweet, female voice that if he would kindly get her out of the bag she could cast some light on their surroundings.

Cross quietly said, “Herjaza?”

Celeste spoke from somewhere in the darkness, “What?”

Cross blindly untied the duffel bag and slid the sheathed Rune Sword named Herjaza out of the bag. Dropping the now empty bag, which he had borrowed from one of the troops in the CS outpost, he pulled the blade out of the sheath.

The darkness surrounding them receded and Cross could see about sixty feet in all directions. Celeste was lying on her side, still in the SAMAS power armor. Both Damien and Ares had their weapons pointed out into the darkness and looked ready for battle.

As Celeste righted herself and stood up, she said, "What the hell is that, Cross?"

Cross stood up and said, "Look alive, this ain't no ceilidh, damn it."

Celeste said, "A what, now?"

Cross smiled and said, "A party. Pronounced Key Lee. Never mind."

Cross left his C-20 holstered and stepped closer to the others, holding the illuminated sword up high.

Cross said, "The Shifter had a bunch of these magical weapons hidden on the ATV. He killed another Cell to get them. As I was falling through the Rift, Flint killed Mosin. I think we might be screwed. No way home."

Celeste gasped, "Mosin's dead?"

"What do we do now?" asked Damien.

"That's unfortunate," said Ares. "Mosin seemed like a good guy for a spook. What else can we do? We rise to the challenge, we find this 'master' and kill it, then try to get home."

Cross nodded and said, "Exactly. Ares has it sorted. We get our bearings and then find the master thing, kill it, then find a way back to Earth. Simple."

"Got it," said Damien.

Celeste turned in a circle, taking in the surroundings and said, "Simple."

They could see that they were on a dirt path about 30 feet wide which led away from the spot where the portal had been. The path was lined with small rocks. On the other sides of the path the ground was exactly the same as the path, more dark dirt.

Darkness swallowed by more darkness. Only the magical light of the sword called Herjaza illuminated the path. Cross walked along the dirt path feeling strange holding the Rune Sword. He had moved the sword to his left hand and was holding his C-20 energy pistol in his right hand. Ares wielded the heavy Dragonfire rifle one-handed and held a Vibro-Blade in his left hand. Damien held a C-27 plasma rifle in his hands. Celeste hovered a few feet above them in the SAMAS. They were in a "V" formation and moved along the path.

From the moment Cross had picked up the silver sword it had been talking to him almost nonstop. It was distracting but somehow also calming. It had been Herjaza that told him to not physically touch any of the other swords or items in the box of stolen Rune items which he had transferred to his duffel bag and then buried in the woods behind the ATV.

Herjaza's voice was smooth and almost hypnotic. He had planned on burying the sword but it had told him, in his mind, that if he and the others were going to take on Flint or Flint's demonic master, they would end up crushed unless she helped them. Every fiber of his training screamed beware and don't trust it. In the end, Cross figured, what the hell? He could take it and just not use it. Now walking along in the light cast by the sword, he was both glad he had Herjaza and worried he

was somehow betraying the CS. It had been Mosin who told him they might use magic to fight magic. Cross hadn't really figured Mosin had quite meant like this.

Ares crouched down as both he and Damien simultaneously hissed, "Something is coming."

Damien growled and Ares continued, "Something radiating magic energy approaches."

Celeste spoke up next saying, that the SAM's radar wasn't detecting anything.

Cross holstered his pistol and took the sword into a two-handed grip. It wasn't until after he did it that he realized he had put his pistol away in favor of the sword. Frowning, Cross spoke aloud, "Six Shadow Beasts are approaching."

Celeste was about to ask how he could possibly know when she saw them. Ranging from nine to twelve feet tall, thin and dark. Running across the dirt outside of the path towards the group. Celeste lifted higher into the air for a better view and sighted the targeting system on the first of the monsters. Her C-40R rail gun spat out 40 slugs in one rapid burst.

The lead Shadow Beast was pelted with the forty slugs and knocked down onto its knees from the force of the blast. Celeste hooted and said, "Ha!"

The injured monster looked up at Celeste and roared. The other five were ahead of it and quickly advancing on the four members of Reaper Cell.

As Celeste pointed the C-40R at the wounded, howling Shadow Beast, she let the rail gun burn forty more slugs across the distance and into the creature. The beast tore apart into several dead chunks.

Simultaneously, she pointed her left armored arm at the group of five Shadow Beasts which were almost upon them. Celeste shot two plasma missiles out of the left forearm-mounted CM-2 rocket launcher. The Shadow Beasts howled and attempted to scatter out of the blast. Only one Shadow Beast managed to escape the explosion. The other four were vaporized.

As Damien leaped across the distance between the surviving Shadow Beast and the CS soldiers, Cross yelled, "Don't leave the pathway!"

As the remaining Shadow Beast slashed with its long, wicked black, curved claw at Damien, the Psi-Stalker ducked low under the blow and stood up next to the beast, punching it in the midsection with the butt of his C-27. Rolling to his right, Damien fired two consecutive blasts at the creature while it staggered and then turned towards Damien. The two blasts severely injured the beast, and a shot in its back from Ares finished it off.

Damien smiled and looked about. All six Shadow Beasts were dead. Quickly moving back across the distance Damien stood with the others in the path.

Ares stood closer to Cross and asked, "Why do we need to stay on the path, Sir? Damien seems to be OK."

Cross looked at the others. "Just trust me. I'm pretty sure that as long as we are on the path, they can't cross the rocks and attack us."

Damien canted his head to the right and looked at Cross confused, “How can you know that, Sir? Did the sword tell you?”

Celeste had landed next to the others and asked, “How can the sword know?”

Ares laughed and said, “Because, Celeste. The sword is magic, we can smell it, and it talks to Cross, I assume.”

The three looked at Cross.

Cross shrugged. “What can I say? She’s been talking to me since before we jumped.”

Celeste picked up the crates she had set down before engaging the monsters and frowned. “She?”

Chapter Nine

Flint had used his knowledge of Shifting to Rift himself from the Nexus in Ontario, leaving Mosin with the dagger deep in the CS Major’s throat. Flint was angry at how events had transpired but knew he could salvage things. He saw Cross fall back into the portal as it closed and knew the Rune Weapons were all still safely aboard the ATV.

He would use the ambient power of the Nexus he had just jumped to, the one he had unleashed his summoned Shadow Beasts upon Christiansen and the others at, to return to Ontario and retrieve the weapons. Then he could make contact with his master and give the silver sword called Herjaza to his master.

Flint wasn’t worried about the fact that the members of Reaper Cell were in his master’s realm. They wouldn’t have enough firepower to do much damage, even with a SAMAS power armor. The denizens in the realm would protect the master.

Flint stepped forward and steadied his balance when he arrived at the Nexus where he’d betrayed the Derringer members at. It was still night and dark, just the glow of the intersecting Ley Lines to see by.

He had looked down at his feet upon his arrival, in order to maintain his balance on the rocky hill. He was surprised to see a red laser dot on his chest when he looked down. As he whipped his head up to look out into the darkness, he let out a horrified yell of “No!”

The red laser sighting dot flicked up and the second it was between Flint’s eyes, a sharp crack reverberated across the rocky landscape.

The crumpled body of Flint lay lifeless next to the Nexus as the crunching of boots across snow approached the dead Shifter.

Soto stopped a few feet away from the dead mage and rubbed his hands together in the cold night air. Still wearing the strange leather armor taken from a dead demon, Soto wrapped the makeshift pelts of the gutted Shadow Beasts that he had crafted to stay warm tighter around himself. He looked down at the single, bloody hole between Flint’s eyes. Soto had sat in his makeshift hunter’s stand for so long, he had forgotten what day it was. Patting the L-20 energy rifle which was slung across his back, he said, “Next time, honey. This job called for some old 5.56.”

After disassembling the old AR-15 rifle he had used to kill Flint, he put it away in his pack with the remaining 5.56 rounds he had. Soto set about searching the mage for anything of value before he set the body to flame and headed back to Chi-Town.

Chapter Ten

Cross and the others continued to walk on the dirt path. To either side of them were countless numbers of Shadow Beasts. They had lined up on either side of the path and thus far, none had crossed over the small rocks separating the path from the dirt beyond. They howled and slashed at the air as the CS soldiers walked. Cross yelled to be heard above the howling, “There!” He pointed ahead. They could see a rise in the path. Until now the hill had been shrouded in the darkness, lost in the shadows. Ahead in the light cast by Herjaza, they could all see what looked like a small tower rising up into the darkness.

Damien said, “I wonder how tall it is. Can anyone see the top?”

Celeste said, “I can fly up there and see.”

Ares shook his head, “I wouldn’t. I can sense the supernatural up there. We should probably stick together. Cross?”

Cross was peering at the small, open doorway which led into the tower. The SAMAS was only about eight feet tall, but it was wide, too. There was no way it was going to fit through the opening. Cross was trying to decide if it was better to leave the SAM outside and have Celeste get out of the power armor and go inside with them. The issue was, then Celeste wouldn’t have any armor on and their biggest source of firepower would be left behind.

Cross shouted to be heard over the howling beasts, “Unload those crates here, Celeste. Ares, I recall you have a good understanding of explosives, right?”

Ares nodded.

Cross said, “Right. The crates are loaded with Fusion Blocks. Mosin was in the mood to blow up whatever we found. Get the crates open. Everyone hold onto one block in case we need it later. The rest get set up on a remote control trigger. There should be enough Fusion Blocks in these crates to blow a massive hole through just about anything. We’ll use them here at the base of the tower. Celeste, you’ll either have to continue with no armor on, or stay here and wait for us.”

Celeste stopped cracking the crates open and looked up at Cross. “I can ditch the SAM, Cross. I’ll still have some protection. Some of my tattoos are designed like armor. I can go with you.”

Cross simply nodded, trying to not make a big thing of it. After all, what right would he have to be critical of Celeste using magic when he was still using the sword?

“Okay. Damien and Ares, once the explosives are set, give me the remote, and you two will lead us into the tower. Celeste, you follow me in after them. Let’s get cracking; whatever is here must know we are coming, so let’s not keep it waiting.” Cross tried to sound confident even though he was getting tired. Less than eight hours ago he had been in the bar

where Damien and Ares had found him. That had been after a long day on patrol through Xiticix territory. Now he knew he was likely entering a suicidal, one-way trip into a demonic tower and was bringing the other three along. If they lived through this, as unlikely as that might be, they still had no way out of this hellish dimension full of Shadow Beasts and who knew what else.

Celeste stood in what looked like gym attire. Shorts and a tank top. She didn't look like she should be about to enter combat. The others stole glances at her. Several tattoos were inked across her body. On her legs, arms and chest. Her long black hair was tied up into a ponytail and revealed more tattoos on her neck.

Ares was clad in Dog Boy Armor minus a helmet and had his Dragonfire rifle ready, and yelled to let Cross know he was done. After handing the remote trigger to Cross, Ares punched Damien in the arm and said, "Let's get some."

Damien checked his rifle's clips and nodded at Ares. "Right on, Brother," he said as he put his helmet on and stepped closer to the open doorway.

Cross wished he had worn his enhanced Commando armor, but shrugged and would have to make due wearing the old-style lower CS armor and his borrowed black Juicer plate.

"Ready?" Cross asked the others.

Celeste said, "Try not to freak out when I do this, OK?" as she touched the tattoo on her neck of a Knight in Armor. She was suddenly surrounded in a glowing, bluish-white suit of knight's armor. The armor was mostly transparent and radiated about her.

Damien grinned and said, "Wow, Celeste, you just lit up and made me hungry."

Celeste touched the tattoo of a scorpion on her arm and an oversized scorpion appeared out of nowhere and scuttled forward through the doorway. She said, "That's odd. It's a room. Dark, but illuminated by candles. Seems bigger in there than is possible."

Ares and Damien ducked and squeezed through the doorway, disappearing inside. Cross followed with Celeste right behind him.

Cross looked around the candlelit room. The room did seem bigger than it should be. There were a set of stairs leading up and the oversized scorpion was making its way onto the stairs. Cross held Herjaza in his left hand again and pulled the C-20 out.

Ares and Damien moved across the room slowly, working as a team, cleared the pedestals which had candles on them, and advanced towards the stairs.

Cross flinched briefly as a flaming sword erupted in Celeste's hand. She smiled shyly and moved to follow the Psi-Stalker and white wolf Psi-Hound. Cross looked back at the doorway and said, "Damn." The doorway looked like two full-sized wooden doors. Bigger than they had been outside.

Moving to follow Celeste, he asked, "Ares, Damien, you guys detecting anything?"

Damien growled. Ares said, "Too much. Everything radiates magic and it's messing with my head, Sir."

The scorpion scuttled up the stairs further, with Damien and Ares following it. They trained their energy rifles up the winding stairs and slowly advanced. Celeste was a few steps behind them and Cross was about to step into the first step.

Lightning crashed down the stairs towards them. The scorpion was incinerated. As Cross ducked out of the way, he saw Ares and Damien fly back and crash into Celeste. The three of them ended up in a tangled mess at the base of the stairs. Ares pushed Damien towards Cross and sprinted up the stairs growling and cursing, his Dragonfire pulsing blasts upwards at the unseen enemy. Cross lifted Damien up, seeing the burn marks across the Psi-Stalker's armor.

Celeste looked fine as she stood up and ran after the Psi-Hound. Screaming a battle cry, she held the flaming sword out in front of her as she ran up the stairs. Damien, who was shaking his head, had obviously taken the full blast of the lightning bolt.

Cross left him dazed but alive and ran after the others. The stairs led up into another large room. This room was illuminated by candles also, and Cross saw Celeste slashing her flaming sword down repeatedly on a man dressed in a brown robe. Some sort of invisible protective barrier was protecting him. Cross saw that the Dragonfire rifle Ares had was lying in the wooden floor, broken and forgotten. Ares was locked in hand to hand combat with a humanoid mud creature. Punch for punch, the mud creature and Ares were hitting each other.

A shadow stepped out of the wall behind Ares and swung a black, shadowy sword through the Psi-Hound's neck. As Ares' lifeless body slumped to the floor and his wolfen head rolled away, Cross slashed Herjaza through the shadowy figure. The silver sword cut through the shadowy creature from head to groin. Dissipating into mist, the figure wafted like billowing smoke and was gone. Stabbing out, Cross impaled the silver sword into the midsection of the mud creature. As it fell back and splashed across the floor, any resemblance of it being humanoid was gone. Cross stepped around the puddle of mud, careful not to touch it, and was behind the man in brown robes.

A blast of rocks erupted from the fingers of the man. The impact of the rocks thrust Celeste backwards and away from the man and his protective barrier. As Celeste tumbled away, Damien leaped from the top of the stairs at the man. Landing on the barrier, Damien scrambled up the invisible barrier until his hands found the top edge of the barrier. Cross turned to face the Shadow Beast which was running across the room, having come down a flight of stairs which led up from this room, the shadowy beast screamed a war cry and bolted towards Cross with its large black claws open and pointed at Cross.

Damien frothed at the mouth and in a frenzy, climbed over the top of the barrier and was about to jump down onto the robed man when a bolt of lightning tore out of the air above the Psi-Stalker and lanced down, striking Damien from behind.

Cross pulled the trigger on the C-20 pistol and shot the Shadow Beast in the face. Hurt but seemingly unfazed by the blast, the creature slashed out at Cross. Using the silver sword,

Cross parried the blow and the claws raked across the blade instead of Cross's face. He stabbed out with the sword and the creature shied back, at which point Cross pulled the trigger again, blasting the Shadow Beast. Clawed hands covered the creature's face and Cross was about to fire the C-20 again when the silver sword shook in his left hand and the Shadow Beast was slammed backwards as a gust of howling wind smashed the creature full force. Plastered against the far wall, fighting the gust of wind, it struggled to push towards Cross. He shot it again and saw that it was dead.

Turning to take in the rest of the room, Cross saw Celeste lying on the floor. Hopefully, unconscious and not dead. Cross looked at his friend Damien. The back of the Psi-Stalker's armor was peeled open from the impact of the lightning bolt. Cross could see Damien was dead. Hunched over the now dead man in brown robes, Damien's thumbs were pushed into the caster's eyes.

Cross placed his C-20 back into the holster and placed his right hand on Damien's shoulder. "I'm so sorry, my friend." Cross looked at Ares. "I wish I could have been faster, Ares. I'm sorry."

Celeste sat up, her ethereal looking knight's armor gone. Her flaming sword had disappeared, too. She looked at Cross, saying, "I hate magic users."

Cross grunted and pointed at the set of stairs which led up and out of the room. Celeste nodded and painfully stood up.

Cross looked at Celeste who was shakily standing in gym shorts and a tank top. He said, "Can you summon armor and a weapon again?"

Celeste nodded. "I can, but it'll be the last time today. I don't have much left in me until I rest." Limping a little, Celeste touched the tattoo of a knight and the ethereal glowing and see-through armor surrounded her again. After a moment of concentration, Celeste touched the tattoo of a flaming sword on her body and it appeared in her right hand.

Cross pointed at the remote explosives detonator which was hanging around his neck and laying against his chest, "If I go down, make sure you use this."

Cross led the way. They moved up the stairs until they reached another room. Holding his C-20 flat against his chest and near the detonator, he kept his right hand close to his body, ready to push the C-20 out to fire it or to hit the detonator. Still holding Herjaza in his left hand, he moved into the room. He knew Celeste was right behind him and could hear the crackling of her flaming blade.

The room appeared to get brighter as they stepped into it. Sitting on a throne of wood and bone, a man in black robes with the hood pulled up over his head was chuckling. To either side of him stood unearthly creatures. To his right stood a black version of the white wolf Ares. The thing had a bright, white-fanged smile and looked like a huge werewolf to Cross. On the man's other side stood a wicked-looking creature with a long, crooked, pointy nose, oversized black eyes, and horns; its skin glistened a deep red.

In a scratchy voice, the red-skinned devil thing asked the sitting man, "Master? He wields the silver sword. May I feast on his pathetic human soul?"

The hooded sitting man tilted his head up to look at Herjaza and then his deep, ice blue eyes locked onto Cross's eyes. Cross saw the man's face was like an albino's or similar to a Psi-Stalker's face. It had old scars crisscrossing it and Cross felt his knees weaken. He felt ill and it was the shaking of Herjaza in his left hand that snapped him out of his fear.

In his mind, Cross heard the sword speaking to him. Telling him to be calm, to be ready to push the detonator, and telling him there was only one way out of this and it meant he alone would probably survive.

In a deep and commanding voice, the sitting man said, "Drop to your knees before me, humans!" He pointed his boney finger at Celeste and Cross.

Celeste fell forward onto her knees and then bent over, placing her open palms onto the wooden floor, and threw up. Moaning in pain, she had lost her flaming sword while falling.

Cross stood there. He saw the look of shock on the devilish man's face. The word, "Kneel!" bellowed out with inhuman volume.

Cross simply smiled and said, "No thank you, you mangy punk. I came here to kill you. I also brought you a present!"

Cross sprinted forward at the sitting man. As he slashed the blade of Herjaza straight out towards the man's chest, Cross also pushed the button of the detonator.

The explosion was deafening and the great wooden tower tilted to one side. The man stood up from the wood and bone throne, prepared to stop Cross from stabbing him. The tower continued to tilt sideways and was soon going to be falling down. Hatred burned in the albino man's blue eyes, and Cross could see the words of a spell working on the man's lips. The werewolf creature was tumbling towards the wall as the tower shifted and tipped. The force of the tilting tower assisted the devilish man as it jumped forward towards Cross to put itself between the sword and its master.

Reaching out with its talons, the devil slashed out at Cross. Redirecting his slash with Herjaza towards the devil, Cross buried the silver blade deep into the stomach of the creature. Its talons raked across Cross's face, leaving deep, bloody cuts. The devil looked down at the blade deep in its stomach.

As the tower fell, Cross felt a strange sensation flow into him, almost like the essence of the devil was flowing out of its wicked body, into Cross, and then into the sword.

A blinding flash and the feeling of nausea punched into Cross. He couldn't tell what had happened.

Lying in wet and cold sand, Cross blinked and looked about. He was lying on his back on a sandy beach. Daylight blinded him as he squinted and held his hands up to block the sun. Flakes of snow drifted down into him. Blinking, he sat up to see little eddies of water swirling around him as it soaked the ground around him.

Blinking tears out of his eyes, Cross saw the silver sword stabbed straight down into the sand. Slowly standing up, he looked around. He heard Herjaza in his mind telling him that he had her permission to hold onto her for now. Telling him that to his south, away from the water and sand, he would find his kind.

Cross sheathed the sword and trudged up the snowy sand away from the water towards the south. He sighed. Checking to ensure his C-20 pistol was firmly holstered, he rested his left hand on the hilt of the silver sword, sheathed and laced through his belt, and said, "If this is your doing, Herjaza, thanks."

In his mind he heard Herjaza telling him, "You are welcome for saving your life."

Cross looked out at the remains of a small village. In ruins and empty, he recognized the old, overgrown village was actually an old recreational park in Ontario.

Shivering, Cross untied his old field jacket from around his waist and put it on as he started the long walk which would lead him from Lake Wanapitei, south, and back to Iron Heart. The walk would give him plenty of time to decide what to do with the silver sword, reflect on what had happened, and decide who he would report back to.

Epilogue

Colonel Douglas Hunter sat in his small office. After a long hour of reading the after-action report from Major R.S. Cross, he tossed the report on top of a similar report written by Master Sergeant I. Soto. The Colonel had already dispatched a Special Forces team to the Nexus in Ontario to retrieve the magic Rune Weapons buried there. They should be back in the CS Black Vault soon. Shaking his head, the Colonel sighed, "Lyboc always makes things dirty somehow."

The young, female Military Intelligence Lieutenant assigned to Colonel Hunter nodded. "Yes, Sir. I suppose everything worked out in the end, Sir. May I ask what you are going to do with the two survivors, Sir?"

Colonel Hunter looked up at her. Leaning back in his chair, he sighed again. "Cross and Soto. It really comes down to, do we execute them or put them to work, doesn't it? Your opinion?"

The Lieutenant thought about it. "Well, Soto has been a long-range recon Ranger his whole career. Obviously, he doesn't play well with others if he's always out in the wild. But he's smart and dedicated, like a dog with a bone. Cross, on the other hand, is a decorated officer and was well liked before he left his Commando unit to head off with Mosin. After losing his wife, it won't be hard to come up with a cover story why he simply vanished from Iron Heart. He must be interested in working with our program; he did come all the way here to Chi-Town and not to his old Commando unit in Iron Heart. They seem to be survivors. Both now have some valuable experience. They also both strike me as hardcore CS soldiers who won't shy from a fight or lose sight of their humanity."

Colonel Hunter said, "I'm sure. I could have them both put on a transport and dropped a mile up over Splugorth occupied Nova Scotia with no parachutes and they'd find some way to not only survive it, but kick some ass and be back here in a week looking for more. Screw it. Get them both some training and let's see how they do as Operatives. They can operate

under the Reaper call sign and maybe I really will drop them into Nova Scotia at some point."

"Yes, Sir," the Lieutenant said, unsure if the Colonel was joking or not. She made the necessary notes on her portable device to set things in motion.

Part Two: Redux

"Summum nec metuas diem, nec optes"

(Translated: "Neither fear nor wish for your last day") – Paradise Lost, John Milton

Prologue

Laura Cromwell weaved a spell of Globe of Daylight to make the clearing easier to work in. It was nearly midnight and it was a cloudy, dark night in Minnesota. Her father, Baron Varn Cromwell, a Cyber-Knight, and his two employees, a Juicer named Radek and a Mystic named Sara Young, were with Laura and her team. The big D-Bee, Rory, was their unofficial leader and a brilliant Shifter. Rory was nearly 10 feet tall and reptilian. He stood quietly waiting for midnight to approach, his lizard-like tail swishing back and forth as he tried to be patient. Laura had worked with Rory during the CS Tolkeen wars. The other man in her team was Lukas Broomfield, a Dwarven Necromancer. The Necromancer was not her usual company but Rory said they needed all the help they could get these days. Thus far, the Necromancer hadn't done anything which she couldn't justify in her mind as necessary. Of course, her standards had altered some from the days when she lived in Markeen. The Necromancer claimed he was a Hero of the people and used his dark arts for Tolkeen and those in need. Apparently, the Dwarf had arrived in Tolkeen just before the CS invasion and stayed for the war.

Laura was born near the clearing, in the Barony of Markeen, where her father ruled. At a young age, Laura left Markeen City and had gone to Tolkeen. She had spent only one year working for the Tolkeen Intelligence Bureau before the great city of magic had fallen to the destruction wrought by the invading CS war machine. Now Laura, a Ley Line Rifter, was working with fellow Tolkeen Artifact Hunters to gather valuables from Tolkeen which was under CS occupation and patrol.

Baron Cromwell absently tugged on his now grey beard and spoke to his daughter, "I wish you could have stayed longer. I miss talking to you. If your mother was here she would insist I try to talk you into staying. We could use help with the Xiticix encroachment."

Laura tried to not snap at her father, since he had provided her, Rory and Lukas a safe place to lay low at for the last week. She often missed her time growing up in Cromwell Keep with its medieval fortress walls and diverse population. So many people who once lived in Tolkeen had fled to the City of Markeen, North Fork and Iron Town. Taking a deep breath, Laura said, "If the CS hadn't invaded Tolkeen mother would be here."

Those idiots came stomping in with their guns and bloody war machines and killed mother and thousands of others. They're the reason the Ley Line Defense System was destroyed and now instead of fighting off Xiticix, we have a massive horde of Demons straight out of Hell to contend with. No, father, I can't stay. Rory and I are trying to restore Tolkeen. Tolkeen was the greatest hope humanity and off-worlders had. King Creed is missing and hopefully we will find him someday. When we do, we need all the artifacts we can rescue from Tolkeen before CS hunters find them. I have to go. There's work that must be done."

Baron Cromwell knew better than to argue with her. He simply wished he had more time with his daughter. Smiling, he said, "I remain proud of you, daughter. Fight the good fight and visit when you can."

Laura embraced her father and bid him well. As Baron Cromwell, the Mystic and the Juicer stood in the clearing, Rory, Laura and Lukas proceeded to weave a dimensional teleport spell together. The Baron tried not to flinch as Rory dug his talons into the neck of a horse which was tied down in the clearing. As the hour of midnight arrived, the horse was slain and their ritual spell was cast. Stepping close to each other, the three suddenly vanished.

Radek shook his head and snorted, "That was a perfectly good horse. Didn't realize that's why they wanted to borrow it. I'll have to pay old man Heller for it. Geez. Why not use a nexus point if they needed more power?"

Sara said, "Magic can leave a trail. I gather they were worried about someone divining the nexus points in the area and learning where they went. The same could be done here but who'd think to divine for magic out here?"

Baron Cromwell watched the area where his daughter had teleported away from, as his two employees turned to leave. Cromwell quietly said, "Be safe. Don't let your anger at the CS blind you, Laura. Be safe."

The Baron then walked with his guards back towards Markeen.

Chapter One

Major Ronan Saint Cross, decorated former CS Commando of Iron Heart, Disavowed Operative X159, could care less about his titles or rank. When he left Iron Heart he left his Commando unit and life as a CS soldier and being a husband behind. His wife was killed six months ago by Xiticix and in the time since, he had slain hundreds of Xiticix with his Commando unit and then been recruited into a Disavowed cell where he stepped through a Rift into a pocket dimension and fought demons and barely managed to escape by the most unconventional means. With the help of a Rune Sword called Herjaza, he had managed to return to Earth and make his way back to CS territory as the sole survivor of Reaper Cell. Arriving in the 'Burbs of Chi-Town, he made his way to the city-state of Chi-Town and found his way to a Colonel Douglas Hunter's office. Cross's short-lived commander of the original Reaper Cell had informed Cross that they reported to Colo-

nel Hunter. Having never met the Colonel, since Cross hadn't been back to Chi-Town in over a decade, he was now sitting in Colonel Hunter's office. The 'Burbs were the same as he had remembered. Great sprawls of humanity desperate to be accepted into Chi-Town, and inhuman D-Bees hiding amongst the dirty and poor population.

Sitting in Colonel Hunter's office, as the Colonel read Cross's After-Action Report, Cross thought about when he had first arrived at the shanty town, which was furthest from the City of Chi-Town. He had been on foot, tired and wearing little armor. Wearing old-style CS lower armor and an upper Juicer plate, both painted flat black, he had his jacket on and was carrying a bag. With his C-20 energy pistol and last remaining full clip inserted into it, he had the pistol tucked into his waist, hidden under the coat. With his hands shoved deep into his old field jacket, he was cold and hungry. The interior of the pockets had been cut out and his right hand rested on the butt of the C-20. In his left hand he carried a small CS plasma grenade. Trouble would be better off not finding him today. Slung across his back was the sword named Herjaza, wrapped in leathers and concealed from sight. Being wrapped up in leather hadn't stopped the sentient sword from talking to him for the whole trip. She had an alluring and almost hypnotic voice which spoke to Cross almost nonstop directly into his mind. It was both comforting and distracting. Hardly anyone paid him any attention as he made his way along muddy and snowy avenues between makeshift tents and run-down vehicles converted into homes.

"This place looks like crap," Herjaza had said to Cross as they entered the shanty town and made their way deeper into the 'Burbs. Cross explained the seedy dynamics of the 'Burbs to Herjaza as he worked his way past ratty tents and people who littered the "streets" and couldn't even afford a tent to seek refuge in from the cold. Herjaza had remarked that it reminded her of her time with Gaius Marius. 'Your leaders should use these people like Gaius did. He authorized the recruitment of the landless into the legion and afterwards, was easily able to defeat invaders. You spoke of invading minions of Hell and Dyval, and you remind me of Gaius, Cross. You should do what he did.'" Cross had acknowledged the idea but tried to explain that ultimately, he had little sway over what the CS did, especially now, and explained that many of those living here were not human and thus unusable by the CS. Herjaza had snorted contempt and commented that was a waste of human, or D-Bee, resources which might turn against the Coalition someday. Cross skipped telling her about frequent CS purges of the 'Burbs that took place for just that reason.

As an officer in the CS, Cross was somewhat literate before meeting Rhianna and marrying the scientist. Rhianna had taught Cross to read English with a greater proficiency and then gone on to teach him to read, write and speak French. He had joked with her that being married to her was a challenge since she was so much more intelligent than him. She had insisted that he was easily as smart as her; he had just been denied an education. Cross had enjoyed reading Roman history and old military strategy books. As a team leader of a Commando unit, he had tried out many old tactics and been

successful in their application. This led to his current rank as a Major being earned a few years ago at the age of 38. The only two books he took with him when he left with Mosin to join Reaper Cell had been Legion Warfare and Dante's Inferno. The first was a great tactical warfare book, the second he was still struggling his way through. He knew the words mostly but their meanings were often so confusing.

Cross had spent much of the trip speaking with Herjaza about her time with the Roman Legion and Gaius Marius. Cross had found that he had to concentrate on having private thoughts. It seemed that Herjaza was able to easily read his thoughts and he had to be careful what he thought. Against every fiber of his CS training and his personal beliefs, he found himself greatly liking the Rune sword. It both frightened him and excited him to carry Herjaza. He was still not sure what he was going to do with the sentient sword once he was at Chi-Town. Trying to carry the blade into the City would surely see him torn to pieces by ISS and NETSET operatives. Hell, the first Psi-Stalker or Dog Boy Peacekeeper he passed by would likely confront him.

"So I'll conceal myself from your psychics. I can mask my existence and magical properties from others," Herjaza told him as he stood, deeper into the 'Burbs, leaning against the wall of a café. Watching the people of the 'Burbs move about their lives, Cross had stopped on a street in the portion of the 'Burbs called Firetown. He had purchased food and a coffee in the café and was now standing outside talking with Herjaza as he ate. Before leaving Iron Heart with Reaper Cell, he had cashed out his entire life savings and had it all stored on the CS credit stick in his pocket. Cross smirked, thinking, "if any of these people walking by knew how much I was carrying in credits, they'd mob me." Sipping his coffee, Cross asked Herjaza why she wanted him to hold onto her. Surely she would feel more at home in the hands of a magic user or non-CS soldier.

"Your current position as an unofficial soldier intrigues me. Besides, you fought Volic and his demons in the pocket dimension and when either you seek him out again or he comes for you, I would like to be there when you slay him," Herjaza stated.

Cross nearly choked on his coffee and thought back to Herjaza, "when he comes for me! Great. I assume the guy called master is Volic. I had rather hoped he died in the explosion and collapsing tower."

Herjaza simply said, "You're funny."

Cross finished his food and as he worked on the hot coffee, he walked closer to the security checkpoints at the base of Chi-Town. He stood in the long line of people wishing to talk to the security checkpoint soldiers, seeking entry to sell their goods, or returning from time out in the 'Burbs. This wasn't the preferred method to enter Chi-Town, but he had little choice in the matter. Cross wished again that he could have gotten the SAMAS power armor out of the pocket dimension before leaving it. Travel would have been much faster in the power armor and he could have flown into the city instead of waiting in the long line.

Cross pushed such thoughts away and tried not to dwell on the other members of Reaper Cell who had all died. Damien and Ares especially, as they had been his friends.

After a good hour, he was still nowhere close to the front of the checkpoint line. Several times, Psi-Stalkers and Dog Boys had walked near him. Thus far, Herjaza's claim of being able to mask her presence seemed to be holding true.

Eventually, he was able to present his CS Major ID card and data stick to the Peacekeepers at the front of the line. From there he had made his way to Colonel Hunter's office although it had taken him most of the day to finally find himself sitting in the office chair and waiting for the Colonel to finish reading the report Cross was asked to fill out.

Cross eyed his bag and the sword wrapped in leather, both placed on the floor next to the chair he sat in. The sword was completely inside of the big bag, out of view, but it worried him having it here. He'd not bothered to mention Herjaza's existence, stating he wasn't sure what maniacal and magical thing had allowed him to awaken on the beach in Ontario.

Cross really didn't care if the Colonel gave him a job or kicked him out at this point. He'd just go with either one. Herjaza was telling Cross to tell the Colonel about how Gaius had used the landless to beat back invaders, and Cross did his best to not appear too distracted as he waited.

Finally, Colonel Hunter set the report down and said, "We will get back to you soon. Go freshen up and find an officer's quarters not taken already. My Lieutenant outside will assist you. Good job, Major."

Cross stood, saluted, grabbed his possessions and left the office.

Chapter Two

Soto grabbed his old AR-15 rifle and headed out of his enlisted barracks, headed for the range to practice and get away from the annoying fellow enlisted men he was sharing a room with. "This is why I do long-range Recon," the Ranger thought to himself.

After several hours at the range, he was packing the cleaned AR-15 into its case when he saw the afternoon Range Master show up. The morning Range Master left and Soto made his way over to talk to the Range Master. Seeing him coming, the afternoon Range Master nodded at his office and met Soto inside.

"Shut the door, Ranger," said the Range Master. The man looked nervous and said, "I thought about it. Yes, I'll trade you but I want 4,000 credits too. You're getting the better gun."

Soto sighed, "Am I? You can use this AR-15 all you want here at the range. You don't have to hide it like the JA-12 you have. Have you ever even fired the JA, Tom?"

Thomas Brock shook his head sadly and said, "No. Too risky. Some SF guys left it here two years ago. They never returned. I wish I could shoot it, but you know just having it means the brig."

Soto nodded understandingly. "Right, Tom. You get a real badass old world AR that you can legally own as the Range

Master. I get a JA that if anyone learns I have, I go to the brig. Look, I'll toss 2,000 credits in to sweeten the deal, but not 4k, man."

The Range Master smiled and quickly accepted, "Deal, Soto. It's a deal. Get my AR out and I'll go grab the JA so you can put it in the case you have. It has a sweet scope, man. You're going to love the thing."

When the Range Master went into the back room to get the JA, Soto patted the AR. "You did well, honey. You are a certified mage-killer. At some point, this joker is going to sell you back to me. He just doesn't know it yet. I need the JA for where I'm headed."

Tom returned and carefully laid the JA-12 rifle on the desk. Soto inspected it and the scope.

The Range Master said, "Good to go? I gotta get back to work, man." Tom pocketed the credit stick with 2,000 credits in it. It was the last of Soto's money. His paychecks were always sent to his parents, who lived on the lower levels of Chi-Town. Being in the field almost always meant he had no easy access to his pay. Besides, he usually managed to live off the land. Being in the city was exhausting. He hated the enlisted barracks, the crappy food in the mess hall, and there were just too damn many people around.

After meeting with Colonel Hunter upon his return to Chi-Town, Soto had been instructed to stand by. That was almost a week ago. The only thing that had made being cooped up inside of Chi-Town livable had been the nightly secret visits to Hunter's assistant. Lieutenant Heather Williams was Colonel Hunter's secretary and an Intelligence Officer assigned to the Disavowed program. She had requested an after-hours meeting with Soto in her officer quarters. Unlike the enlisted, as an officer she had her own place. She also had her own rules, it seemed. Normally officers had nothing to do with the enlisted, socially. Smirking, Soto thought, well, sneaking into her quarters every night and being kicked out after the deed was done wasn't really social interaction.

Strolling out of the range with the JA-12 locked in his rifle case, Soto thought about naming it "Heather." He knew he was pretty good with the ladies and tried to not be a jerk when it came to them. Soto hated crowds. Hated most people. He loved his guns and really liked the ladies. They were the only two things he ever gave his full attention to.

After Colonel Hunter told Soto that a CS Major named Cross was going to be heading up a cell called "Reaper Cell," and Master Sgt. Soto was going to be assigned to it, he decided it was time to gear up and sell his stuff that he couldn't carry on him.

Heading up to the motor pool, which was full of Black Lightning CS combat helicopters and CS Sky Cycles, Soto made his way over to his Desert Fox. He had left his modified, white and red skull Desert Fox hovercycle in the motor pool hangar, knowing that all sorts of speed junky CS pilots would see it and the "For Sale" sign on it.

Standing next to his Desert Fox, Soto scratched his head and wondered. He had figured he'd have a bunch of messages left in the cycle. There not only were no messages, his For Sale sign was gone.

"You can't sell it," a female voice said behind him.

Soto turned around to see one of the CS Tech Officers standing behind him. She was wearing blue work overalls and, considering she had her hair up in a messy bun and had grease on her hands and face, Soto thought she was cute. He noted that she also had the For Sale sign crumpled up and in her hand.

Soto frowned and said, "Since when was there a rule saying you can't sell stuff up here?"

She smiled at Soto, tossing the crumpled up sign at him, "You misunderstand me. You can't sell that because you'll regret it. I checked her out. That's one nice, souped-up cycle, man. Are you that hard-up for credits, or did you steal it?"

Soto laughed, "Oh I've stolen a few cycles in my time but this baby was bought in Texas and has been my getaway for about 5 years now. It's not stolen. I don't really even need credits. I'm a Ranger and most of my time is out there. I just can't keep it for where I'm going next and I don't want to pay storage on it for who knows how long."

The Tech Officer wiped her hands on her overalls and extended her right hand to shake Soto's. "I'm Petty Officer Melissa Hawkens. Maybe I could hold onto her and keep her tuned-up so whenever you do come back you can get her?"

Soto shook Melissa's hand and cocked his head to the side, thinking. "So. You get a free cycle until I return, if I return, and I get the satisfaction of knowing that if I return she'll be well maintained and ready for me to have. Kind of seems like a sweat deal for you, Melissa."

Smiling, Melissa pulled her long brown hair out of the messy bun it was in and said, "Let me sweeten the deal for you, then. I'm off work, and in about 30 minutes I'll have freshened up and can take you to dinner and maybe a show. What do you say, soldier?"

Soto nodded and acted like he was thinking about it. "Hmm. Okay, deal. But no mess hall crap. Let's hit the nicer part of the 'Burbs and get some good grub. Okay?"

Chapter Three

Thinking hurt. Soto rubbed his temples and leaned back in the chair. Sitting in the classroom with several others whom he had neglected to meet since he barely made it here in time, Soto was exhausted. Unlike his visits to Heather where he was unceremoniously kicked out after an hour or two last night, Melissa had kept him busy until three a.m. when they had stumbled back to her place. No roommates meant her place, not his. They'd finally fallen asleep around five a.m. Soto was rudely awakened by his cybernetic internal clock calendar at seven a.m. Groaning, he had silently slipped out of Petty Officer Hawkens' apartment without waking her and grabbed a coffee on his way to the classroom.

Soto sipped at the now cold coffee and tried to will his headache away. He decided he still hated people. Melissa had insisted on a nightclub after the old movie in the 'Burbs. They had met some of her friends and then the crazy dancing had started. Tired and sore, Soto promised himself he would avoid

clubs and dancing in the future. Although he had hopes of seeing Melissa again tonight, and had left her a note saying so and apologizing for having to leave without saying bye.

City life was okay in small doses but Soto missed the great outdoors and its freedoms. Life out there was dangerous, but more suited to his needs. Having roamed and done recon from the East Coast to Colorado, Soto was interested in someday heading out west. Thus far, the CS hadn't sent anyone past the Great Barrier Mountains, which he knew of, but Soto hoped he would be assigned to head west someday. Actually, now that he was assigned to this program, he might be headed to some super-far places. It appealed to his sense of adventure; exploring new places was his excitement.

Soto glanced around at the others in the room. The instructor was talking about Xenobiology and ways to extract information out of non-humans. Bored and uninterested, Soto checked out the others in the room. The man next to Soto quietly chuckled and leaned closer, saying, "You think this guy's ever even seen an alien?"

Soto snorted. Apparently too loud, since the instructor stopped speaking and looked at Soto with daggers in his eyes. "Something funny, Master Sergeant Soto?"

Soto looked innocent and shook his head no. "Sorry, Sir. I choked on my coffee."

The man next to Soto piped up, asking, "Have you ever been off-world, Captain Lewis?"

Captain Lewis looked peeved and said, "What I am teaching is important. If you expect to survive in this job, you need to know Xenobiology."

Standing up, the man next to Soto nodded. "Right. I agree. But have you? Been face to face with demons? Not D-Bee scum. Real demons. I have. I've killed demons in other dimensions. Your course may be of value, but some things can't be interrogated, and you are better off killing them immediately. Time for break, I think. You want our undivided attention, then give your students breaks." Looking around the room, the man said, "Take ten, gentlemen. Get a drink. Move around and we will resume in ten."

As the man walked out of the room, the instructor said, "Major Cross!"

Everyone else filed out for a break and Soto went with them. Seeing Major Cross was walking away from the room, towards the cafeteria, Soto jogged to catch up with him.

Cross looked back at Soto as he ran up. Still headed towards the cafeteria, Cross said, "Are you Master Sergeant Indra Soto?"

Soto nodded. "Yes, Sir. You are Major Ronan Saint Cross then? I was told you are heading up Reaper Cell. Have you picked anyone else for your team, Sir?"

Cross stopped walking. Turning to face Soto he said, "Picked? I was told I was taking you. After reading your file, I accepted you because you killed one of the people on my list. I have no idea who else is going to be joining us."

Cross started walking again. Soto hesitated, then followed. "List, Sir? I've killed a lot of people. I have been doing long-range Recon for almost ten years. In that time I've killed more people than I can recall, Sir."

Cross continued into the cafeteria and said, "Flint." Stopping at a drinking fountain, Cross got himself a drink.

Soto smirked and got himself a drink too. "Oh. Flint. Used an old-world military rifle. One shot between the eyes. Bastard had it coming."

Cross nodded. "Evil bastard. I had a run-in with his boss. Nasty thing. At some point I'm going to have to hunt the monster down and slay it."

Soto sighed, "Boss? Damn. I had hoped that was that. I guess you recovered the stolen weapons Flint had. When I killed Flint I had hoped that was the end of it."

Cross glanced up at Soto and frowned. "Look, I know you are used to running around out there solo. I'm used to wearing Heavy Commando Armor and leading several Fire Teams of Commandos on attacks on the Xiticix or other supernatural creatures. We both find ourselves assigned to this program. I'm not going to lord rank around. I expect whoever ends up working with us to be a team. From what I've seen, this can be a very short-lived career move. I want to beat the odds and live for a long time, while still destroying our enemies. Pay attention in these classes. I know we have both been out there. We are good at what we do. But I want us to be model students and pass all these advanced survival classes so we can get out there and kill some bad guys."

Soto nodded. "I'm on board with you. I want back into the field."

Chapter Four

Radek ran. Speeding along at inhuman speeds, the Juicer sped across the old freeway. As he ran, he imagined hundreds of automobiles zipping along the interstate. Laughing out loud, he pushed himself harder. Chemically augmented by a cocktail of manufactured drugs, his harness pumped more adrenaline and other chemicals into his blood. Radek could see, in his mind's eye, the cars falling away behind him as he ran faster than them. He figured the old rusted signs dictating speed limits were a suggestion not the actual capable speeds of the old-world cars, and he was sure he was moving faster than the speed limit allowed.

Radek was from Texas originally, having grown up in Laredo, he found his way to El Dorado and unlike many Juicers, instead of serving out a term of employment to pay for his conversion into a superhuman he arrived with enough credits to pay for his conversion outright. He was older than a lot of Juicers tended to be too. At 26, he'd earned the credits running with the road gangs in Texas before becoming a Juicer. Now at 30, after 4 years as a Juicer, he had arrived in the City of Markeen and taken what he considered a temporary job as a protector for the Baron. It amused him that a Cyber-Knight needed a protector. He'd been here for almost a year now. It was getting to be time to move on. Hoping he had a good 2 to 4 years left before Last Call, he wanted to explore further west. Colorado sounded interesting to him.

Leaping over two cars, overgrown with weeds and a budding tree ripping up out of the rear passenger seat of one,

Radek leaped a good twenty feet upwards and soared over the cars. Landing swiftly back onto the broken old pavement, he continued to run across the old freeway system. He was somewhat obsessed with the old world. His collection of books about automobiles and road maps from before the time of Chaos was extensive. Years ago, when running with members of the Pecos Empire, he'd scored the books and maps from an underground garage. Even though he couldn't read very well, he enjoyed the pictures of the cars and their parts.

Ahead was a crumbling overpass and he slowed down some. It would make a good ambush spot and you never knew what was lurking out here. Barely jogging along at roughly 20 mph, Radek advanced on the ruin. Unsnapping his energy pistol in his right hip holster, he stopped running altogether.

Something felt wrong. He wasn't a psychic like Sara was, but he had a good head for danger. Lately, the Xiticix had been encroaching further into human lands from the Duluth Hive. It was possible they were this far west but they generally didn't hide and ambush people. Deciding that if it was bugs, they'd attack him by swooping down out of the sky, Radek pulled his NG-45LP energy pistol out of the large leg holster he kept it in and held it pointed down.

Radek knew that the recent sporadic Xiticix activity in the area was partially due to the loss of the Markeen Hive. He wasn't really sure of the exact details but knew a hive had been constructed somewhat close to Markeen and the Baron had been in a tizzy about the need to hire experts in Xiticix fighting. Cromwell had been about to order Radek to go find a large group of Wild Psi-Stalkers who roamed the area. The morning before Radek and a group of mercenaries were about to head out in search of the Stalker Clan, the Baron had excitedly informed Radek there was no need. Telling Radek that a massive group of CS was in the area, the Baron stated that the CS had attacked the new hive and utterly destroyed it. They left nothing behind for future Xiticix to use. Radek thought it was odd but felt glad that the issue was over. Now just a few Xiticix Scouts and Warriors were in the area. Like bees that had lost their home, they buzzed around and were a nuisance but this felt different.

Looking at the overpass Radek thought about it. It could just be people from Iron Town, the town had swelled in size and easily had 30,000 people living there now that Tolkeen was gone. Someone needed to rename the town to Iron City. Iron Town was a lucrative iron ore industry controlled by the Baron. With humans, D-Bees, Dwarves, and a bunch of other races living there, whoever was hiding in the rubble of the overpass might just be scared of him. Wondering what he was doing. With the increased production at Iron Town, bandits were more frequent too.

Radek stood on the old freeway with a wide stance and continued to hold the pistol down. He yelled out, "I mean you no harm. I am Radek, Imperial Guard to the Baron. Show yourselves."

Radek almost let his reflexes kill the Simvan Monster Rider who stood up in the rubble. It took a concerted effort to not shoot the Simvan. A down side to the chemicals coursing through his augmented human body. Radek recognized the

Simvan. It was War Chief Grelic. Grelic was a regular in Iron Town and the City of Markeen. The Rider was often hired to run transports of Dwarven smelted iron ingots to either the City or to Northern Gun where it was sold. Relaxing, Radek started walking towards the Simvan but stopped when Grelic held up a hand to warn the Juicer to stop. Frowning, Radek wondered what was wrong. Grelic picked his way across the rubble towards the Juicer. Holding an NE-50 particle beam rifle at the ready, the Simvan carefully advanced on the Juicer.

Radek continued to hold his pistol, ready to react but still pointed down. Once the Simvan was about 60 feet away, Radek said, "What's up, Grelic? You're kinda making me worried. You recognize me, right?"

Grelic stopped walking and in his guttural voice and broken English, he said, "No trust. Why you here? We attacked by human and Dwarf and a big lizard guy. Destroyed our convoy. I know girl belong to Baron. You belong to Baron. Why you here? What do you want?"

Confused, Radek said, "Day off. I like running on these old roadways. The Baron's daughter and her crew attacked you? Why would they do that? Laura left Markeen three days ago."

The Simvan growled, "No. Her crew attack convoy today. She had many warriors and mages with her. Only I live. Vehicles now gone. They take Grelic tank. Ingots left on road. Others die but I escape."

Radek winced, "They took your Naruni hover tank? How'd they get that from you?"

Grelic looked very mad and growled, "Baron Cromwell girl. Not think she attack. Now tank gone and other vehicles destroyed. People dead. I escape. But see where they go first. Now I go to Baron. He owe me big."

Radek was nodding. Still unsure if the Simvan was likely to shoot him, Radek said, "If the Baron's daughter stole from you then yes, the Baron will compensate you, Grelic. But trust me, the Baron had no knowledge of this. This baffles me. Where did they go?"

Grelic finally lowered the rifle and pointed east. "Know you, Radek. Still not happy with Baron. But decide I trust you, Juicer. Show you."

Grelic headed back towards the rubble of the overpass and Radek ran to stand by his side and followed the Simvan north.

Grelic described the events to Radek as they walked. Listening to what happened, Radek was even more confused. What was Laura up to?

Grelic described how right after Rory ordered the convoy members assassinated, Grelic had managed to flee due to the several dozen mages and warriors were distracted by a CS patrol. The CS had swooped down and attacked them and Grel had run as fast as he could. After the majority of the CS were killed or had fled, the group of mercenaries run by Rory and Laura had traveled further east towards the Xiticix Duluth Hive Lands. They had two CS Sky Cycle pilots as prisoners now. Grel said that he silently followed Rory's Avengers and that they were very excited to have some CS prisoners. At first, Grel said the two pilots were treated badly, struck and kicked until Rory demanded they be left alone due to the fact that they needed them alive.

Radek asked, "For what?"

Grelc shook his head, "No hear. They all stop near a nexus close to Duluth. Use a Rift and go into it. I see other side. It was Xiticix home world."

Radek stopped walking and said, "What! Laura and all of Rory's crew went into a Rift to the Xiticix home world! You sure, Grel?"

Grel looked at Radek and said, "Grelc never go there. But see it when Xiticix come here. Recognize it. Sure."

Radek whistled, "Damn. They needed CS soldiers. Stole your tank. Went to the Xiticix home world. What the hell are they up to?"

Chapter Five

Melissa Hawken, Petty Officer in charge of mechanical repair and maintenance, Coalition master mechanic, was tired. It had been a late night but a fun night. Four late nights in a row. She was really enjoying hanging out with the CS Ranger named Soto but all these late nights were starting to catch up with her. She sifted through invoices and hated that she spent more time overseeing repairs than actually doing repairs. It was tedious work, coordinating fleet maintenance on Sky Cycles and other CS airborne vehicles. Rank had its privileges but also a lot of responsibilities.

Melissa could have gone home an hour ago but it was an unspoken deal that when the boys took your toys out on patrol you waited for them to return. They were late. Two hours late. Six CS Sky Cycle pilots had checked out their cycles from her to run a patrol. Now they were late. She knew their commander, Lieutenant Jack "Maverick" O'Dell; she had been out on a few dates with the man. Unshakable and a real jerk, he was an awesome pilot and a cocky SOB. Not long-term material to her, but fun on occasion.

"Chief!" One of her deckhands yelled from outside of her office.

Melissa ran out and looked out the open bay doors. The view was spectacular this high up on the east side of Chi-Town. People of the 'Burbs far below were ant-sized. Melissa was able to see in the distance a CS Sky Cycle with a trail of smoke pluming out of the rear engine. Turning to face those on duty with her, she started yelling commands at them and said, "Look alive! Clear a path and prepare for a possible hot landing. Get FRC and MedTac ready!"

The Fire Response Crew geared up in record time and medics came rushing in from the med bay just as the lone Cycle landed. Melissa had to hand it to Maverick, he had one engine operational and it was in bad shape. He landed and jumped off the battered Cycle. As his boots hit the deck, he staggered and pushed medics away from him. Moving straight towards Melissa, he flung his helmet onto the ground and standing in front of her, he said, "Do it."

A medic was trying to hold him upright as he slumped backwards. Melissa saw the hole in Maverick's leg armor. He was losing a lot of blood and was now unconscious. Now that he was out, the group of medics swarmed him again, remov-

ing his armor and set about working on his injuries right there on the bay floor. Melissa looked at his pale face and hoped he wouldn't die.

As the medics prepared him and a stretcher to take him to sick bay, one of them asked her, "Do what?"

Her worry forgotten, Melissa flushed red and was embarrassed. She ignored the medic and moved closer to the damaged Cycle.

Melissa could hear one of her repair crew members telling the medic how pilots were all crazy and Maverick was just asking the Petty Officer to fix his favorite Sky Cycle. Eyeing the damaged Cycle, Melissa appreciated the cover story. Her crew knew she was a minor psychic and also knew it embarrassed her. Labeled as a Psi-Sensitive by Psi-Battalion, her two abilities were referred to as Object Read and Telemechanics. Rubbing the PRP bar code tattooed on the back of her neck, Melissa knew Maverick wasn't concerned about the Cycle. As it was, his favorite Cycle was still being tuned up and this was a loaner Cycle.

Looking at the Cycle, Melissa knew he was referring to her ability to Read the Cycle, not fix it. Why he wanted her to Read it had her scared. What had he fought with? She was suddenly worried about Maverick's health. Was he worse off than he seemed? Melissa took a deep breath and tried to calm her nerves. Reaching out with her right hand she placed it onto the side of the warm Cycle. She didn't move for several minutes except to shudder occasionally.

Finally, she stepped back and shook her head. The events of the patrol lingered in her mind; they replayed themselves over and over in her mind. She felt sick and wished she could unsee the events. Looking around, she saw that the only people in the area were her repair crew. She smiled weakly at them and told them to move the Cycle and go home for the night. "We will fix it next shift," she said. Looking around she saw Sgt. Brown and moved to stand next to him.

"Sergeant, you used to be assigned to a Special Forces team, right?" Melissa asked him.

Putting the tools down which he was carting over to the tool chest, Sgt. Brown nodded. "I was until I lost both my legs. Cybernetics now. Why?"

Melissa frowned. "I think I need to talk to someone in SF, kinda on the down low."

Sgt. Brown nodded. "Okay, Chief. I know how to get a hold of them. Let me see if an old buddy can talk to you."

Chapter Six

"Hold him still," the D-Bee said.

Struggling against the magic restraints holding his hands behind his back, Corporal Ivan Tillman tried to move closer to his fellow CS teammate.

What had started as a relatively routine patrol had ended in disaster. Now laying on his side, Tillman slowly moved closer to Vasquez. Two D-Bees were holding Vasquez upright and on his knees, while the third was punching him. Tillman said, "Hit him again and I'll ruin your day, you ugly mutant."

Laughter pealed out from the three D-Bees and the one punched Vasquez in his face again. Tillman kicked out and hit the assailant in his knee. The D-Bee's left knee snapped backwards and he howled in pain, dropping down next to Tillman. Tillman tried to roll onto the D-Bee's broken knee but was kicked in the head by one of the others.

Dazed and seeing stars from the brutal kick, he was surprised to see a large Lizard Man holding his head in its massive, taloned hand. Looking into Tillman's eyes, the Lizard Man let go and stood up.

The Lizard Man stood looking down at the injured D-Bee with its broken knee. Shaking its head, one of the D-Bees said, "We wasn't going to kill them, Rory. Really, boss."

Tillman turned his aching head to watch a Dwarf in grey and black robes walk up to the injured D-Bee, who started to scream in fear. The Dwarf looked at the Lizard Man named Rory. Rory nodded.

Turning to face the other two bully D-Bees, Rory said, "We need these CS soldiers alive. Need their heads in good shape. Go pack and be ready. We Rift in about twenty minutes."

As the two D-Bees ran off, Rory left too. Tillman looked at the Dwarf and now silent D-Bee. Squinting, Tillman saw the Dwarf stomp on the D-Bee's knee, cracking it back into place. Amazed that the D-Bee didn't even flinch, Tillman was horrified to see the D-Bee's face was now mutilated and the thing was obviously dead. The Dwarf said, "Rise. Guard these two."

As the Dwarf walked back towards the camp, the dead D-Bee stood up and with dead eyes, it watched the two CS soldiers. Tillman looked over at Vasquez. Vasquez had the same worried look as Tillman.

An hour later, the Dwarf returned and ordered the undead D-Bee to follow him. Tillman and Vasquez were escorted along by the other two D-Bees and a human woman.

Standing several feet in front of a nexus point, Tillman watched as the group prepared to leave. They were packed up and had their vehicles all facing the nexus. Tillman started to understand what was about to happen. As the Rift opened and showed a vast, rocky alien desert through the portal, Tillman said, "Oh hell. Where is that?"

The woman turned to look at Tillman as the others moved into the open portal, "You are about to be the first CS soldiers to ever visit the Xiticix home land."

Vasquez and Tillman were shoved through the portal along with the rest.

Standing on the alien world, Tillman watched the D-Bees, humans, warriors and mages make their way across the rocky ground towards a small rock hill with a tunnel carved into it.

"Move, boys. Into the tunnel unless you want a wandering Xiticix to see you and swoop down for dinner." Laura chuckled as she pushed the two CS soldiers forward.

They entered the cave and a Globe of Daylight flared into existence, illuminating their way. Tillman helped Vasquez walk since the man was unsteady on his feet. They passed several burnt and battered corpses of Xiticix as they walked deeper and downward into the cave.

Finally, exhausted and in desperate need of rest and water, Tillman and Vasquez were escorted into a small cavern ad-

jacent to a larger cavern. A makeshift frame of sturdy metal bars were slid closed behind the two CS pilots. Jailed behind bars in a dank and dark cell, Tillman looked out into the larger cavern as Vasquez dropped to his knees and then laid down.

Tillman watched as the Lizard Man named Rory, the human woman, the Dwarf mage and the D-Bees all walked over to a man wearing jeans and a T-shirt. The man was directing several others, both human and non-human, to go do something. After a few minutes, the large cavern was empty of all but the man, Rory, the Dwarf and human woman. The four spoke for a while before they all walked over to the cell.

Tillman backed up deeper into the cell to stand next to Vasquez.

The man who was wearing jeans and T-shirt stood outside the barred cell and looked at the CS pilots. Suddenly, Vasquez bolted upright and stood up. Tillman was surprised and watched Vasquez march around the cell on stiff legs. After a few minutes, Vasquez started jogging more smoothly in circles. Tillman kept asking Vasquez what he was doing but Vasquez didn't answer him. Finally, Vasquez stopped and punched himself in his own mouth. Blood leaked out the corner of his mouth and Tillman stepped closer to him to try and help. Suddenly, Vasquez punched Tillman in the stomach. Not expecting the blow, Tillman doubled over and saw Vasquez fall down.

Vasquez was whimpering and kept saying, "I'm sorry T-man, I couldn't control myself."

Tillman shot a dark look at the man in jeans and knew him for what he was. A Mind Melter. The man said to the others, "No problem. The weaker one is easy enough to control. I'm sure the other is too. When it's time, I'll take what we need from their minds."

As the four moved away from the cell, Tillman, still in pain, moved over to Vasquez and said, "Calm, man. Be calm. We'll get out of here. Just hang on, Vasquez."

As he spoke the words, Tillman was anything but calm in his own mind.

Chapter Seven

Soto was disappointed. After a long day of classes, he had been looking forward to seeing Melissa. When he rang the bell in her quarters, there was no answer. He had then gone to her work to see if she was there. The crew on duty told him she would have been on the previous shift but when they arrived, she wasn't there. They assumed she was on a sick day at home. Soto returned to Melissa's place but got no answer again. With mixed feelings, he left her quarters and went to the dreaded mess hall. He had no right to be upset with her if she was out. But at the same time, it wasn't like her. He had only known her for a short while but she'd told him she looked forward to seeing him. So where was she?

After a disgusting meal, Soto left the mess hall, having barely touched the food. He swung by the range but Tom wasn't working today. Finally, Soto had laughed at himself for being so social lately and then being bummed when all his

“friends” weren’t available to play. Annoyed with himself for feeling left out, or left behind, he grumbled that this is why he avoided cities and people.

Finally, Soto gave up and found himself walking along the route to the lower levels where his parents lived. Stopping, he sighed. It wasn’t that he didn’t like his parents, it was just hard to see them. They both always tried to convince him to reassign to a command here in Chi-Town where they could see him more. Deciding he wasn’t up to it tonight, he made his way back to his mostly unused enlisted quarters barracks and dropped into his unused bunk. Without bothering to undress or get under the covers, Soto laid back and fell asleep.

* * *

Melissa was frightened. The images she had seen when she Read the Cycle had scared her. Brown was true to his word and had gotten her in to see a Special Forces Officer named Collins. After describing her vision to the man, he had left her in the interrogation room. He didn’t return. Two other, higher ranking CS SF officers arrived and re-asked her the same questions Collins had. When they left, Melissa had seen the two Dog Boys standing guard outside the room. Tired and alone, she began worrying about what was going to happen to her. Every bad scenario that ran through her mind made her more scared.

Finally, a man who did not speak to her came in. She tried asking him what was happening but he had just sat down across from her at the table and looked at her. She stopped trying to talk to him since each time, he would raise a hand to shush her. Studying his uniform, she saw he was assigned to Psi-Battalion and an ISS officer. Realizing he was a Spectre, she bit her lip and stayed quiet. After 20 long minutes, he stood up and walked to the door. Stopping, he looked like he was going to speak, then didn’t and just smiled at her and left.

Melissa was hungry and was pacing the small room when after an hour, there was a knock at the door. She stopped pacing and looked at the door. No one else had knocked. Whoever it was knocked again.

“Come in?” Melissa said.

The door opened and a middle-aged man and woman came in. They were both dressed in plain clothes and although they were both obviously military, neither was wearing rank. The woman smiled at Melissa and said, “Good evening, Chief Petty Officer Hawkins.” She stood next to the door and then remained silent. Melissa said, “Good evening, ma’am,” and moved to her seat when the man motioned to it.

Sitting down across from Melissa the man placed a briefcase on the table and sat back in his own chair.

For a moment, Melissa thought the man was not going to talk to her either.

“I am Colonel Douglas Hunter. Sit. Don’t salute me. Just sit. I apologize. Red tape and bureaucracy slows everything down. You came forward with valuable information. Special Forces was a good guess but they don’t know what to do with the information. For all their gusto and cocky attitudes, they sometimes lack imagination. That’s where my department comes in.”

Melissa nodded even though she didn’t quite understand. “What department are you, Sir? Intelligence?”

Colonel Hunter smiled. “Officially, my department is classified and funded under the code of SAM1, or Special Access Maintenance Project One.”

Melissa looked confused. “Never heard of it and I have no idea what that means, Sir.”

Colonel Hunter nodded. “Good. As it should be. If asked, I tell people I make sure the lights stay on here in Chi-Town. This tends to lead people to the conclusion that I...” Colonel Hunter waved his hand at Melissa, and she realized he wanted her to finish his sentence.

“Um, you oversee maintenance details and repairs to the city?”

Colonel Hunter nodded. “Something along those lines. People fill in the blanks and get bored of me quick enough. I’m no fun at parties and get left alone. In fact, I actually oversee a black ops detail.”

Melissa sighed, “Telling me this, I am sure I am either as good as dead or about to be transferred to some far-off mission that I won’t return from. Either way, I can kiss my job here goodbye.”

Colonel Hunter leaned forward in the seat. “You have a general idea, then. I have no desire to kill you. In fact, I’d like to use you. Your talents, I mean. I want you to brief a black ops team on what you Read from the Cycle, and then go with this team to where you saw. I want you to point out the man you saw to these operatives, so they can kill him.”

Melissa started to stand up, stopped herself and said, “I qualify at the range every year. But that’s the only time I ever fire a weapon. I’ve not been in the field. I’m not trained for combat, Sir.”

“Oh, come now. You had basic infantry training like all CS soldiers. You are a very capable, young Petty Officer who has received high marks every year on her record. I don’t need you to become a killer. Just do what you have been trained to do, and let the operatives handle the killing. This team is comprised of two very deadly soldiers who will keep you safe, get you to the target, and kill everything in their way to get there. It’s simple, really. You just need to be there to let them know they are on the right path and to point out who needs killing.”

Colonel Hunter stood up and looked down at the mousy young woman. She was maybe five feet, six inches tall and all of a hundred pounds soaking wet. He smiled and said, “I am not really asking you as much as letting you know your new orders. Listen, afterwards if you stay on with us, I’ll find you a safe position unless you find you like the freedom of being in a Cell. I noted your records state you are a fair martial artist too. A black belt at 17. That’ll help some.”

Melissa looked up at the Colonel and tried to not show him that she wanted to cry. Wondering just what a Cell meant, she stood up and said, “Where do I report to, Sir?”

The Colonel held out his hand and Melissa shook it. He said, “I’ll send someone to fetch you in the morning. Go home. Get some sleep. When you report to us in the morning, come dressed causal. We will outfit you. Oh. And of course this is a subject you will never talk about with others. Don’t

bother letting your old job know you won't be coming in, we took care of that. Keep to yourself tonight and I'll see you in the morning, Chief Petty Officer Hawkins."

When he left the room with the woman, they left the door open and Melissa saw that the Dog Boy guards were gone.

Starving and uncertain of her future, Melissa made her way to the after-hours mess and then home.

Chapter Eight

Jimboy the Blue Mage fancied himself as a master sorcerer and a free mage. Beholden to no one, he was a free spirit. As a Ley Line Walker, he jumped onto every Ley Line he encountered and drifted along to wherever it led. Using the Ley Lines to pull energy from and cast spells or to teleport from location to location along the Ley Line, he felt as one with the magic energy.

Much of his time he spent along the east coast of the old American empire. Befriending those sexy and deadly Shemarian Warriors or spending time exploring the upper portions of the Dinosaur Swamps, Jimboy just liked to travel.

He was born in Lazlo and had attended the school of Line Walking. At eighteen, he packed his possessions and Ley Line teleported across the east coast. Avoiding CS lands and staying out of both Tolkeen and the Federation of Magic areas, he traveled wherever the magic flowed.

Occasionally, he would assist others in need and had fought off a few nasty creatures in his days, to save the day and then move on. When asked who he was, he tended to call himself the Blue Mage or the Unbeholden.

Today, life found him drifting slowly along a Ley Line near Lake Superior. He knew there were a lot of Xiticix in the area and decided he might be safer just teleporting to somewhere else along the line. Sending out a Ley Line Observation Ball to zip down the line ahead of him, he watched through the ball at the land streaking by.

"What's this?" Jimboy said to himself. Through the Observation Ball, he saw a group of mages and D-Bees standing before a nexus further down the line. Not desiring to interfere with the spell they were working on, Jimboy let himself slowly drift. He was curious what they were up to, so he held the observation ball hidden in the Ley Line and watched.

Anger flared in Jimboy's mind as he saw a female mage shoving two beaten up men towards the now open Rift. There was little chance that he alone would be able to rescue the men. Maybe they were bad guys and didn't need rescuing. Even if that was the case, Jimboy hated seeing how the others were treating the two men. He avoided the CS, but that didn't mean he didn't know they were CS soldiers.

Jimboy looked through the Observation Ball at the alien desert landscape on the other side of the now open Rift. Weaving a spell, Jimboy filed the information gleaned from the spell and waited. Once the Rift closed and everyone had stepped through it, he noted the clearing was empty. Instantly and effortlessly, he teleported to the clearing and stepped out of the Ley Line. The enhanced power of the nexus point lifted

his spirits and he cast a spell to warn him if anyone should come wandering into the area. Setting down his pack, Jimboy set up camp.

Setting up his tent he cast a spell of armor across it. After gathering wood to make a fire, so he could cook his dinner, Jimboy cast an ignite spell and sat down to prepare dinner. An hour later, after eating and setting a few wards around the camp, he was magically alerted to the presence of two men walking closer to the Ley Line. Jimboy took more food out of his pack, happy to have a reason to have a second dinner, and started cooking it. It would be nice to share a meal with visitors. If they were friendly, of course. If not, then they would be quickly dispatched by his array of combat spells. Even at the age of twenty, the Blue Mage knew he was a master mage with little to fear.

* * *

Both Radek and Grel saw the campfire. It was near the nexus point that Grelic had informed Radek that the Baron's daughter had been at.

Radek and Grelic saw the fire pit, roasting something that smelled appealing to them both, the tent set up and sitting in the glow of both the fire and Ley Line was a squat male wrapped up in a dark blue cloak. Radek looked at Grel who was chuckling, "What's so funny, Grel?"

The Simvan warrior laughed harder.

"No, really. What's so funny? If we were planning on sneaking up on the guy I think that option is gone." Radek rolled his eyes.

Grel stood up out of the brush and small trees they were hiding in. Still chuckling, Grel called out loudly, "Hello camp. I am mighty Grelic! War Chief of Simvan! With me is Incredible Imperial Guard Radek of Barony of Markeen. May we approach oh crafty Unbeholden?"

In a booming voice, the squat man in the camp called out, "Dearest friend! Deadly Grel. You and your man are welcome in my camp. Come. We will feast and tell our stories!"

As Grel advanced to the camp, Radek said, "What the hell?"

Radek easily caught up with Grel and the two made their way into the light of the fire. Radek saw a remarkably round and squat man wearing a dark blue cloak sitting on a log smiling at him. The guy's skin was a light blue in color and his appearance was almost comical aside from the fact that he was dressed in traditional Line Walker garb with some obvious Techno-Wizard weapons. Sitting on the log, the guy seemed totally relaxed. Pointing to the cooking food, the Blue Mage beckoned to his visitors to eat.

Squatting down, Radek saw Grel do the same. Grel thanked the blue D-Bee mage for the food and handed Radek some.

Radek accepted the steaming hot meat, holding it in his hands and smelled it.

The Blue Mage chuckled and said, "Prime Rhino Buffalo. Nothing better, Imperial Guard Radek." Stuffing some of the meat into his mouth, the Blue Mage happily gulped it down.

Radek saw Grel eating his portion and figured, what the hell, and proceeded to eat. Radek had to admit it was very good. They ate in silence for a while. Grel grabbed two more

logs and dragged them close to the fire. Sitting down on a log, Grel said, "What bring you here, Unbeholden?"

Radek felt completely lost and interjected, "You guys know each other, I take it?"

Grelc smiled, "The Simvan know the Blue Mage. All know him to be great mage and protector of the innocent. I not met him until now but my people know him."

Jimboy nodded happily, "I travel along the lines of power. Sometimes I find myself helping those in need. I am not a hero, it's just my upbringing. I grew up in Lazlo and although I am my own person I do try to do what's right."

Radek watched as the blue D-Bee ate more food, thinking that the mage had the appetite of a Mega-Juicer.

Radek nodded, "That's a fresh outlook. It's nice there are still good people out here."

Jimboy asked, "Why are you out here?"

Radek summarized the events to the Blue Mage and said, "So basically, I am trying to figure out what the Baron's daughter is up to."

Grelc remained quiet and refrained from telling the Blue Mage his motivations were darker and along the line of revenge.

Jimboy sighed, "It is a sad thing. I was not able to assist the two CS soldiers. The woman you described forced the two men through an open Rift along with her group."

Radek cursed, "I'd like to know where they went. I'd like to ask Laura what the hell she's up to."

Jimboy replied, "I can, of course, re-open the portal to where they went. However, I think our next move is to ascertain who it is that now approaches our campsite. Someone's coming."

Chapter Nine

Soto stood next to Cross and Melissa, trying his best to ignore the stares of the Special Forces soldiers who were assigned to the Death's Head Transport. Several SF soldiers had pointed at him or his team over the last hour. He couldn't blame them. Seventy-eight Special Forces RPA troops dressed in CS flight uniforms and ready to mount up in the forty-eight SF SAMAS units, twelve Super SAMs and eighteen Sky Cycles. Grunting, Soto thought, "and that's not counting the ninety-six SF ground troops." The DHT was crowded. Looking at Melissa, who was dressed in a flat black, Triax-built Explorer full environmental armor suit with twin TX-5 pump pistols on her hips and his modified L-20 energy rifle, he admired her long, black hair and decided he liked the dark eye shadow she had on. Leaning closer to her, he whispered, "Damn, you look like a deadly and sexy mercenary."

Melissa smiled and said, "Of course I do. You, on the other hand, look insane. Blood-black leather armor and that horrid black pelt. Is it really a demon skin? For real, Soto?"

Soto nodded. "These leathers are tougher than that Explorer armor. The pelt I earned the hard way. Shadow Beast pelt. For real."

Melissa scowled. "Mmm, well I think you looked nicer when we were in Chi-Town. At least you combed that messy mop of hair in Chi-Town. Now you look like you intentionally messed your hair up. Twenty inches of tangles. Good luck next time you use a comb. Oh, and before you think about laying a finger on me, you will bathe, heathen."

Cross laughed. "He did intentionally mess his hair up. I saw him do it. Nut job."

Soto grinned, shook his JA-12 and growled, "I invoke fear!"

Two CS SF troopers in earshot stiffened, fingered their holstered CS pistols and watched the trio. Only Cross had spoken to any of the Special Forces guys up to now. The SF team leader, Commander Higgins, had told them that Cross was a CS Major running an undercover job and everyone was to let them be. The trio were hitching a ride with the SF troops who were on their own mission.

Cross shushed the two. Adjusting the straps on his black Juicer plate armor, he slung the leather-wrapped sword across his back, tightening the strap to keep Herjaza fastened tight to his body.

"You OK, Ronan? Are you expecting trouble?" Herjaza asked Cross in his mind.

"Always," Cross said out loud, and both Melissa and Soto looked at Cross.

Melissa look confused and said, "Always what?"

Soto flipped the safety off his JA-12 and turned to look at the CS SF trooper closest to him, "You there, Sergeant Logan, get a SitRep from your Commander. Trouble might be brewing."

The SF trooper only hesitated for a second before keying his radio mic and contacting the SF Commander.

Seeing Soto prepping his rifle, Melissa turned and looked at Cross. His eyes had a faraway look to them again. She wondered again what was going on in his mind. It was like he was talking to someone. Out loud, she said, "You're not a registered psychic, Cross. Are you a psychic?"

Cross shook his head no. "I have twenty years of combat. I feel it. My stomach just churned."

Herjaza spoke to Cross, "I sense nothing, Ronan. Nothing supernatural or magical that I can sense, anyway."

The SF trooper looked up at Cross and dropped the radio. Slamming his SF Dead Boy armor's visor closed, he stood up and bellowed, "Major Higgins says hold tight to something! Incoming!"

Several consecutive explosions erupted across the forward section of the DHT.

Special Forces Sergeant Logan grumbled, "Six hits. Damn! Listen up! RPAs, suit up now! Armor up and lock and load. Oorah!"

Sergeant Logan turned to Cross and said, "Sir, your team can grab MJPs over there! Just in case."

Cross nodded and said, "Vur ha, Sergeant."

The Sergeant had turned half a pace away from Cross, ready to direct his SF team. The Sergeant turned back to look at Cross. "You are, or were, a Commando, huh? Vur ha indeed."

Well let me show you how SF does it. Oorah.” The Sergeant saluted Cross and went back to directing his team.

Melissa said, “What is an MJP?”

Soto smiled and said, “Mobile Jet Pack. In case we have to jump out of the DHT. You know, if we get shot down.”

Melissa nodded, “Right. Of course. I miss my old job. Show me where the MJP is, Soto!”

Cross thought to Herjaza, “Can you sense psychics?”

Her voice in his mind still caused him some trepidation, but it was also calming and alluring, “You are not psychic, Ronan. Honey, you’re just that good.”

Cross scoffed and thought, “Yeah, right.”

Soto handed Cross an MJP as several more strikes erupted across the front of the DHT. The massive troop transport veered to its right and several troops fell down.

Soto held onto straps attached to the side of the troop bay and onto Melissa, so she didn’t fall.

Melissa said, “Thank you, Soto. You still need a bath, bub.” Looking over at Cross to see how he fared, Melissa saw him hovering sideways above the deck and then slowly lower to the deck. Pushing himself up, he stood and dusted himself off.

As the DHT continued to veer down and right, SF troops finished suiting up in SAMs and mounting Cycles. The ground troops were all wearing jet packs. A siren bellowed and the light turned from normal to red in color. The SF Commander, Higgins, was yelling over the loud speaker, “This is Major Higgins! We have been hit by several missiles. Whoever is attacking us has some serious firepower and it is likely we will lose the DHT. Be ready to deploy! Listen, boys and girls, I know you don’t know why, but this is SF, it’s do or die! Make sure our three visitors get away unharmed!”

Cross pulled his old field jacket, which was loaded with extra E-Clips, on over his armor. Checking his mag, he reholstered the C-20 pistol and caught the CS Dragonfire heavy rifle Sergeant Logan tossed to him.

Sgt. Logan stepped over to Cross and his team with six SF troops with him and said, “At least for now I figure you could use some serious CS firepower, Sir. We are on you until you get to safety!”

Cross held the Dragonfire in his right hand, pointed up, and ran the fingers of his left hand through his salt and pepper hair. He still needed a haircut. Grinning, Cross said, “Don’t care what anyone says, you SF guys are OK. Thanks. We will join you in fighting whatever is attacking us. Afterwards, we’ll go our way.”

Commander Higgins bellowed across the loudspeaker for the SF troops to deploy. His commands were cut short as more explosions rocked the front of the DHT.

Now the DHT was tilted forward and obviously down as it sped towards the ground far below. Using deployment hatches along the sides of the DHT, across the top of it and the rear hatch, the 107 occupants in the bay of the transport screamed out of the airship like angry bees out of a shaken hive.

High above the once great city of Tolkeen, the DHT streaked downward, SF SAMAS power armor units, CS Sky Cycles piloted by Special Forces soldiers, and SF troopers utilizing mobile jet packs shot out in all directions away from

the out of control DHT. The three members of Reaper Cell followed six SF troopers out across the sky.

Sgt. Logan rocketed towards the north and the eight others followed him. Far below, Major Cross could see what looked like hundreds of mercenaries with non-CS hover tanks and power armor suits buzzing around. The majority of the mercenaries were ground troops in a rarity of types of body armor. He could see several locations where the ground troops were clustered around surface to air missile deployment vehicles.

Soto called out over his comm unit to both Cross and Melissa, “See that, guys?”

Cross responded, “From this high up, all I see are ants in armor, mostly ground forces.”

Soto replied, “Yeah, well you should consider cybernetics, Sir. I can see the markings on all of those ants’ armor! They are sporting the colors of the JAL.”

Apparently, Sgt. Logan was patched in to the frequency since he piped up with, “Intel states the Juicer Army of Liberation is in disarray and should be located in either North Dakota or further west. This must be a splinter cell of the JAL. Intel reported that the leader of the JAL died. These guys must be on their way to Tolkeen which is just north of here and was our destination.”

Cross considered the options. Attack the JAL like the SF guys were doing or continue north over Tolkeen and onto their destination near Markeen.

Sgt. Logan said, “Sir? You still want in on this fight? Or are you going to continue towards your original mission? Either way, we are escorting you.”

Cross cursed, “Damn it, Sergeant Logan. My instinct is screaming join the fight. But here’s what we are going to do. You have my team’s thanks. You were right, I am a former Commando, and as such I want to bolt down there and kick some ass. I am officially releasing you from escort duty. The three of us will stay at max altitude and continue north. You guys rejoin your team and give those Juicers hell. Good luck!”

Sgt. Logan turned around and hovered in midair, saluting Cross. “Yes, Sir. Good luck. Okay boys! Let’s go shorten some life spans!”

As Cross, Melissa and Soto continued north, the six SF troops shot back south towards the fight.

Soto stated, “I’m not really a large-scale war guy, but this is one time I wish I was. We should probably bear east some and not fly right over the ruins of Tolkeen. Just my two credits’ worth of input.”

Cross led them on a circumventive route past Tolkeen and on towards the north.

After they could no longer see the battle or ruins of Tolkeen, Cross lowered closer to the ground. Avoiding trees and the tops of a few outlying building which were burned and ruined, he dropped down to the ground. Both Soto and Melissa followed him and landed.

Walking towards what looked like a pre-cataclysm gas station, Cross removed the MJP and dropped it in the muddy ground. Soto tossed his MJP on top of it. With some help removing the pack, Melissa did too. Soto set a one minute timer on a frag grenade and dropped it on the three packs.

The three jogged over to the old gas station and around to the rear of the dilapidated building as the frag grenade exploded.

Melissa pulled out a worn map and laid it out across the remains of an old car's hood. After a few minutes, she pointed to a location on the map and said to the others, "Here. We should be right about here by this old freeway. Looks like about half a day's hike to our destination."

Soto peered at the map and agreed. As Melissa folded up the map, returning it to her backpack, Cross placed the leather wrapped sword onto the hood of the car and proceeded to unwrap it.

"Ahh, sunshine. Thank you, Ronan." Herjaza said in Cross's mind.

Melissa looked at the silver sword as Cross attached it to his belt. Soto grunted and removed two archaic dagger guns from his pack and slid them into hip holsters. Brushing a light falling of snow off his leather armor, he turned to see Melissa looking at him.

"Where do you guys find such strange weapons? No. Don't tell me. I don't want to know." Removing her armor's face plate, Melissa looked up at the sky and let the falling snow hit her in the face. "What have I gotten myself into?"

Cross grunted, "Reaper Cell. Disavowed and unsanctioned. We don't exist. We use whatever we want for weapons and armor. From here on out, no more rank and no reference to the CS. We have no ties to the Coalition. We are typical mercenaries and hate the CS for its anti-magic and anti-D-Bee stance. Equality for all and damn the Emperor. Let's go. You know where we are going, Melissa. This is why you're here. Lead on."

Melissa asked, "Since I'm leading, does that mean I am the leader of this non-CS mercenary team?"

Soto laughed.

Cross smiled. "You want to be the leader?"

Melissa shook her head no. "Nah. I was kidding, Ronan. I don't even want to be here. I am just hoping against all odds that we live through this."

Ronan Cross shrugged and pointed for Melissa to lead on, saying, "Neither fear nor wish for your last day."

"Grumpy much, Ronan? She's a good sport for being a mechanic. Quoting Paradise Lost now, are we? You really do remind me of dear Gaius," Herjaza joked.

Chapter Ten

As the three members of Reaper Cell trudged through the night, they stayed about a hundred feet away from the Ley Line. Close enough to the magical blue line to use the ambient light from it to see by, but far enough away from it to feel safe.

Cross followed about ten feet to the rear of Melissa, bringing up the rear guard for the three of them. Leading from the rear felt odd to him but Melissa wasn't trained like he or Soto were. If this had been his old Commando unit he would be leading from the front and wearing SAMAS power armor, hunting Xiticix or other creatures. Cross checked their rear

again and tried to remain focused as Herjaza spoke nonstop directly into his mind. Absently, he reflected on how much he liked her, wondering how clouded his judgment was.

"I like you too, honey. Are you even listening to me? We are getting closer to a nexus point and I sense magic there," the silver sword said.

Cross looked back to the front. Seeing Melissa trudging through the snow, he noticed he couldn't see Soto.

Soto kept one of the demonic blade pistols pointed down and held against his chest. Moving silently ahead of the others, he quietly picked his steps and utilizing his amplified hearing implants, he listened to the other two following him. He estimated Melissa was about twenty feet to his rear and Cross another ten beyond her. Soto could hear a soft humming sound from the Ley Line and running water beyond it. Most likely a creek on the other side of the Ley Line.

After a while, Soto noticed a new sound. Taking a knee in the snow, Soto stopped moving. He heard Melissa stop walking and was glad she was paying attention. Cross stopped a moment later.

Soto held the pistol with his right hand, his arm down and close to his side so that the blade pistol pointed out ahead. He raised his left hand up high and used hand signals to advise the others to wait here.

Melissa was just barely able to see Soto's signal with the night optics of her helmet. She held up her hand and mimicked the signal for Cross to see.

Cross lowered himself into a ready position and alternately checked the rear and looked forward to where Melissa stood motionless.

Soto slowly advanced forward, taking quietly placed steps into the snowy ground. After about sixty feet, he dropped quietly onto his stomach. Sliding quietly across the ground, he continued forward towards what looked like a small campfire. Between his amplified hearing and his telescopic vision, he could tell the campfire was empty of people. He saw and heard the crackling fire, could see a pitched tent and was even able to faintly smell cooked food. Turning his attention to the fire pit, he saw food cooking over it.

Frowning, Soto wondered if the occupants of the camp might be in the tent. Seeing no one in the light of the nexus point, he adjusted his hearing. He could not hear breathing and decided the occupant or occupants of the camp had to be somewhere else. Wondering if they somehow knew the three CS soldiers were in the area, Soto glanced around. Magic, he decided. If they knew the three of them were out here, it had to be some sort of magical divination because there was no high-tech sensor equipment that he could see.

Holding the pistol straight out ahead of himself, two-handed, Soto slowly rolled several feet to his left, away from the light of the Ley Line. Gliding across the snow, further around the campfire and nexus, Soto slowly made his way closer to some vegetation which would afford him some cover and concealment. If there were people, mages or creatures here, they might be fooled into thinking the rest of his team was approaching from the direction he was now closing in on the camp instead of where Melissa and Cross actually were.

* * *

Radek felt uncertain with Jimboy's plan. More at home with reacting swiftly than stealthily, Radek remained in a heightened state of readiness. Time slowed in his mind as the chemicals of his harness pumped through his augmented body and he watched the Blue Mage add some more meat to the fire.

Jimboy had explained to them that a third dinner was a lucky sign but just in case the newcomers were a danger, he would erect a Globe of Silence around the three of them. Jimboy said that since they were sitting on a nexus point, he had plenty of energy to also cast an Invisibility: Superior spell over the three of them and warned that they all needed to hold still so the two spells would work.

Still sitting on the upended log, Radek did his best to hold still and marveled at the sudden appearance of a lone man. Standing up from the bushes that he and Grel had been hidden behind, a solo individual stood up. Radek was surprised at the stealth of the man's appearance.

Radek watched as the man, dressed in blackened leathers and carrying two odd, bladed weapons, casually approached the campfire. He wasn't trying to be stealthy at all now as his boots crunched across the snow, and he called out, "I may not be able to see you, spell caster, but I know you are there. I have no ill will towards you and would kindly ask that you don't attack me."

Radek grinned as the man stood within ten feet of the three of them. Obviously unable to see or hear them, he was boldly standing there talking to them. Radek nearly jumped out of his skin when the leather-clad man tossed both of his bladed weapons down at the side of the fire. The blades stuck into the ground and Radek eyed the weapons, seeing that they were archaic looking pistols.

Soto stated, "It looks like you have enough food cooking there to share. I can see that there are only three of you here by your tracks."

Soto pointed at Radek, saying, "One." Then at Grel saying, "Two," then at the Blue Mage, "Three."

Clapping and chuckling Jimboy said, "Oh well done, master tracker! I like you. I'll lift the spell now and you are welcome to join us!"

Grel grunted and Radek was impressed, realizing that if the man had wanted to, he could have simply placed three rounds down-range at them instead of just pointing them out.

Sitting down cross-legged, the man in leathers sat directly behind his bladed pistols, once the two spells dissipated.

Radek waved.

Grel stated, "You see unseen. You are Wilderness Scout?"

Jimboy motioned to the food and gathered some himself, eating and said, "Please, master tracker. Join us, tell us your story. I am the Unbeholden. Please feel free to call me Jimboy. This is Imperial Guard Radek and the Great Warrior, Grel."

Soto looked at the blue D-Bee, the Simvan and Juicer each, and then smiled, "Thank you, Jimboy."

Radek watched as the man reached past his weapons and retrieved a small portion of cooked meat.

"I am indeed a Wilderness Scout. Please call me by my name, Soto. I hail from the lands around Northern Gun and am traveling east," Soto said between mouthfuls, wondering if Radek might recognize him. Apparently not, thought Soto, as the man had not reacted like he might. Soto recognized the Juicer, although the man named Radek had not been a Juicer when he had last seen him. Soto reflected that he was glad he had worn a helmet when he had last seen Radek, many years ago while he had been undercover in the New San Antonio mercenary company. If Radek knew it was Soto who had sabotaged that mission, the Juicer might hold a grudge.

* * *

Cross motioned for Melissa to stay still. Advancing to her position, he quietly said to her, "Stay here. If they are friendly, I or Soto will call for you. If not, you'll hear me open fire on them and in that case, you should come running with guns blazing. Got it?"

Melissa nodded and Cross moved towards the Ley Line.

* * *

Soto grinned and said, "Oh, that was good. Thank you, Jimboy."

Sitting back and pushing his long hair back out of his face, Soto said, "So. Since we seem to be getting along, I guess I should tell you I'm not alone."

Radek immediately felt a new rush of adrenaline and Grel glanced around.

Jimboy nodded and said, "I had wondered when you might bring that up, master tracker. My spells are very powerful and I know that there are two of you. Feel free to ask your companion to join us. There is plenty of food! I never travel light."

Soto frowned at Jimboy, but then smiled and called out, "Come on in! They seem to be nice and they have dinner!"

A few minutes later, Melissa stood next to Soto and looked excited.

Thanking the Blue Mage for the offered food, she blurted to Soto, "It's him. The D-Bee, oh sorry, the blue guy from my vision."

Soto nodded and said, "Okay. Good to know we are in the right area." Looking at Jimboy, Soto continued, "This is my lady friend and traveling companion. I'll explain her vision momentarily. But first. Sir?"

This time Radek did jump up. His hand resting on the handle of his holstered pistol, Radek saw a third person step out through the Ley Line and walk into the camp.

Grel looked indecisive but ready to react. It was Jimboy who said, "How? Oh my! My magic did not detect you, Silent One!"

Cross stood a few feet away from them all and frowned.

Radek asked, "Are there any more of you out there?"

Cross looked from Jimboy to Radek and said, "No. I'm it. My name is RC. You've met my friends, Soto and Melissa. Thank you for allowing us into your camp. The three of us are independent mercenaries currently out on our own. Melissa is

a psychic and had a vision. It had you in it, Jimboy. We need to talk, okay?"

Jimboy grinned and said, "I'm flattered. The ladies don't dream about me too often, I imagine. I, the Unbeholden, welcome you all, Imperial Guard, Great Warrior, Master Tracker, Beautiful Lady and Silent One. Let us feast and share our stories!"

"This one is silly. Yet he radiates magic brilliantly," Herjaza spoke in Cross's mind.

Cross chuckled and quietly said, "I know, right?" Louder he said, "Yes. We will tell our stories. The three of us, we call our team 'Reaper Company.' Soto is a Wilderness Scout. Melissa is an Operator, a master mechanic who also is our psychic. I was a Glitter Boy pilot once, but lost my power armor a long time ago after one too many battles. We are searching for a woman spell caster and a male Mind Melter who are, according to Melissa's vision, going to unleash demons upon the innocent."

Sitting down across from the others, Cross looked at Radek who nodded and then sat back down.

Radek said, "Go on."

Chapter Eleven

Kent Dustin sat in the cave examining the notes scattered across the makeshift desk. He tried to drone out the noise of Rory and Laura talking. Kent didn't like either of them but he needed them.

As he had figured, the one CS captive named Vasquez was easy to break. His mind was scared and weak from being injured. The one called T man was harder to break. In fact, Kent hadn't bothered to try very hard with him; he was a defiant and stubborn man. Kent had T Man moved to a different cell than Vasquez and had not bothered to visit T Man again. He could care less what the others did with him. His prize was Vasquez.

Kent rubbed his temples and reflected on what he had learned from reading Vasquez's mind. The plan was to rape the mind of the CS soldier and learn his secrets. Most importantly, to become familiar with the memories which were of the inside of Chi-Town.

Once again, Kent wished he could have done what he had in mind by himself. He hated people. All people. But more than he hated working with Rory and the others, Kent hated the Coalition. He quietly dreamed of ways to mentally tear Rory up. He could force Rory to scratch his own skin off. To dig his claws into his lizard skin and peel back layer after layer until he bled to death or better yet, begged for death. Kent smiled warmly at the thought. As for Laura, Kent's thoughts on what he could make her do were much more explicit.

Shaking his head, he pushed those thoughts away. He had entered Vasquez's mind six times now and at this point, the soldier was well and truly broken. Having mastered control of the man's beaten and magically healed body, now he needed to quietly rummage through the soldier's memories until Kent found the best place to hold onto and see the best location inside Chi-Town to unleash the Xiticix. Between them all, they

would rip open a dimensional portal from here to Chi-Town and glory in the deaths of their enemies. Afterwards, Kent reflected, he would betray the trio of mages before they could betray him. Chuckling quietly, Kent prepared himself to go visit Vasquez again.

* * *

Laura Cromwell looked at Kent from across the expanse of the cave. Rolling her eyes, she said to Rory, "He is insane. Listen to him, Rory. Cackling like a madman. Once we use him to open the Rift, he needs to be taken out."

Rory glanced at Kent before turning back to Laura, "I have a plan for Mr. Dustin. Trust me. While you and I are performing the ritual, our Necromancer friend will be watching Kent. When the portal opens and our warriors lead an angry mob of Xiticix through, good ol' Lukas will be watching Kent. At my signal, Lukas will raise the two, at that point, dead CS soldiers, to kill Kent."

Laura frowned, "Whatever it takes to slay our enemies, Rory. How much longer? I want to do this ritual at the height of power in this world. That time is approaching in hours. If Kent isn't ready by then we will have to wait another day."

Rory smiled his big, toothy grin and said, "Relax, Laura. We shall have our revenge."

Chapter Twelve

Jimboy listened as RC told them how they had been traveling with some other mercenaries who had no interest in saving CS lives. RC said he was not a big fan of the CS and had typically shied away from interacting with them in the past. But this was different. If Melissa's vision was true, it wasn't just CS soldiers who would be attacked, it would be the civilian population inside of Chi-Town that would be overrun by demons. RC said that was something that he couldn't stand by and let happen. As RC spoke, Jimboy realized why he hadn't been able to, and still couldn't, detect RC. He could sense the presence of both Soto and Melissa, and even tell that Melissa was a psychic, but RC was completely closed off to his magic.

Interrupting RC, Jimboy exclaimed, "You are carrying a Rune Sword! Oh, I am sorry, Silent One; I just realized why I can't detect you. Your sword is concealing you."

Melissa said, "You are? That's, uh, well, that's um..."

Soto interjected, "You thought it was a Techno-Wizard sword, didn't you? RC doesn't advertise the fact that it isn't a TW sword because Rune stuff is considered very valuable."

Jimboy nodded, "Very smart, RC. Sorry I interrupted you, it just came to me. My goodness, I have always wanted a Rune item. Oh, don't be alarmed, my friend. I would never try to take it from you, that wouldn't be very honorable of me, would it?"

Jimboy smiled and Cross nodded. "Tell you what, Unbeholden, if I die and she wants you, you'll be sure to know. So. That's our story. Melissa's vision led us to here. We are trying to find out where these bad guys are and stop them before they enact their plans. As it happens, Melissa also saw you, Jim-

boy, in her vision. I just don't know if that's because you're an adversary or a friend."

Jimboy laughed, "I am not a adversary. I am very willing to help you on this quest of yours."

Soto said, "Thank you, Jimboy. We appreciate it."

Radek coughed and said, "I think Grel and I may be able to help you, too. You see, the female mage is a young woman named Laura Cromwell. I work for her father. We are trying to hunt her down, Grel and I, to figure out why she is doing this. Grel, I think you should let these new friends of ours hear what you told me."

Grel stood up and placed his hands in his hips. "Laura Cromwell attacked my group. Stole my tank. Killed my friends. She try to kill me. I follow her and see her and others use this nexus to Rift away. She take two prisoners with them. The two were Co'lition troops. I see other side of Rift. Not been there but I know where it is. Xiticix home world."

Melissa balked, "They went to the Xiticix home world?!"

"Yes," said Grel. "She take Co'lition soldiers, her warriors, and other mages to Xiticix world."

Radek stated, "Laura is a Ley Line Rifter. Her fellow mages are Rory, a big, tall Lizard Man and a powerful Shifter; and Lukas, a Dwarf Necromancer. All three are bitter with the CS, fought for Tolkeen in the war, and Laura's mother died by CS hands."

There was silence for a while as they each thought quietly. After a few minutes, Melissa said, "That's sad. Her mom, I mean. My vision makes more sense now. They hate the Coalition States. Want revenge on the CS. The demons they want to unleash inside of Chi-Town are Xiticix. They took Coalition troops as prisoners to somehow use them to get into Chi-Town. In my vision, I saw a man who was reading another's mind and then a Rift being opened into Chi-Town. Then I saw horrible death."

RC said, "There you have it. As long as you are all willing to help, the six of us need to find these people and stop them. The only thing I see as a problem, other than its six against who knows how many, is how in the blazes do we find a way to the Xiticix home world?"

Jimboy started laughing. The others looked at him.

Jimboy said, "Why my fellow heroes, that part is easy! I love fate, she is so pretty, so smart. I happened to learn a way there just today. I'll simply open a Rift for us. I can do that right here, whenever you are all ready to go."

Standing up, Jimboy shook his weight about. Took a deep breath, exhaled and smiled.

Pointing at the nexus, he asked, "Ready to go, my new companions? They will sing songs of us, oh how brave the Blue Man group was. Noble and un beholden, they worked as one to keep even the Coalition safe."

"I don't know if I want people to sing about me," said Radek, "Blue Man group sounds weird."

The others nodded. Jimboy said, "The Sassy Six?"

Soto sighed, "Gods no, please."

Jimboy grunted, "Well, I don't know if I can open the Rift without first knowing who the song will be about, my new friends. After all, this could be the last quest I go on."

Cross shrugged, "Okay. I hereby formally invite you all into the ranks of Reaper Company, a free and un beholden mercenary company. Reaper Company, saviors of all." Cross rolled his eyes but smiled.

Radek said, "I accept, for now."

Herjaza spoke to Cross in his mind, "Did you know that many years ago, before I was locked up in that vile CS Black Vault, a man called Red Kenth carried me over the Atlantic Ocean, across Atlantis and to the Americas? Red Kenth's real name was Kenth Radek and he was an Atlantean Undead Slayer. I wonder if this is Red Kenth's son."

Cross returned a thought to Herjaza, "You have been around, haven't you. I'll file this news for later."

Grelic grumbled, "I do this. Not for songs but for irony of D-Bee saving Co'lition, and it right thing to do."

Jimboy clapped his big hands and laughed, "All is well. Reaper Company will save the day. Okay. I need an hour, Silent One. I'll set up a ritual and get this portal opened. Have any of you ever Rifted before?"

Only Cross nodded yes. "Was a bad experience on a different dimension. I daresay even going to the Xiticix home world is preferable than my last time through a Rift."

Jimboy smiled and said, "Stoke the fire, friends. I may want a snack while I set up the ritual."

Later, when she was sure no one would overhear her, Melissa quietly said to Soto, "You sure Cross, or RC as he seems to be going by now, is a CS Major? He sure doesn't act like one."

Soto smiled and put an arm around Melissa, "Trust me. He is, hon. Things outside Chi-Town are not like being stationed in the city. You won't find a more pro-CS officer than Ronan. Hang in there. Now, what do you say to us finding a little privacy and..."

Melissa punched Soto playfully in his chest, "I was serious, bud. You need a bath first!"

Chapter Thirteen

Rory pulled his large, armored, scale body suit on. The jumpsuit was specifically designed to fit his tall, reptilian body. Standing ten feet tall with a tail of five feet meant he had to buy custom-made armor. The scaled armor glistened a dark greenish blue and was made from the hide of a nasty creature he had fought while traveling across the Megaverse. Born into a family of Shifters, he grew up casting the dark arts. Happenstance led him to the former great city of Tolkeen at the young age of twenty. That was sixteen years ago. A relatively short time considering his species could live for hundreds of years. His species was also very territorial in nature and he had been ecstatic to call Tolkeen his home. After the CS destroyed his "nest," he was enraged. He burned with anger when so many others simply gave up and headed for new homes across North America. He had stayed in Tolkeen and considered himself a great avenger of Tolkeen. Harassing the Coalition at every chance he could, he fell in with both Laura and Lukas. Laura shared his vision of returning Tolkeen to its former greatness.

Lukas was just willing to destroy anything Rory deemed needed to be killed and so often was the case, re-animated to fight alongside them. If Lukas had any sort of backbone or self-motivation Rory might have to kill the short Dwarf Necromancer. Happily though, the Necromancer was content to do whatever Rory said. More than once, Rory wished Laura was his species and not a human. The love he felt for her was reciprocated but could never really be real since she was human.

Rory watched as Lukas addressed the D-Bee mercenaries they had hired. The plan was nearing its final stages, finally. He could taste the revenge that would be theirs. Rory scoffed at the stupid D-Bees and how much they feared the Necromancer. Lukas was simply regurgitating the commands that he, Rory, had told Lukas to say.

Rory glanced across the cavern at Laura who was talking to the Mind Melter, Kent. Love flared in his black heart and with an effort, he stomped it down. Laura was also following his orders. Prepare the vile human named Kent for what was culminating.

The ritual they were preparing was awesome. Any mischance of misspoken spells would result in a terrific flare of energy that would likely result in all of their deaths. Rory chuckled. Lukas would like that, he was infatuated with death.

Kent had the memories of the weaker CS soldier locked in his mind. The two soldiers were now standing, chained to the stone pillars located around the ritual circle. They would be slain and their energy would assist in the spell casting.

Between them, the Rift from here in the caverns, on the home world of the Xiticix, to the park located in the heart of the CS city of Chi-Town would be opened and a horde of thousands of Xiticix would be led into Chi-Town. The destruction and resulting death would be magnificent.

After they enacted their revenge, Lukas would be ready to animate the two, then dead CS soldiers and then kill Kent. As long as the hired mercenaries didn't interfere with the plan, Rory was content to take them back to Earth with them when they left. Odds were they wouldn't survive the part of the plan which required them to agitate the Xiticix and lead them back from the massive Xiticix hive to the Rift. However, if they survived, Rory would honor the contract and pay them. It would be well worth the price and he might have use of them again.

The revenge plan should have been enacted years ago. He had presented the plan to King Creed towards the end of the CS Tolkeen war. The now missing King of Tolkeen had just come from a meeting with the old human woman named Erin Tarn. Rory was sure the woman had somehow softened Creed's resolve. Highly disappointed, Rory listened to King Creed tell him that it was over. They needed to put their efforts into escape and helping the civilians. Enraptured in anger at what felt like a betrayal, Rory had opened a random Rift and when Creed had turned to look at it, probably assuming Rory intended to go through it, Rory shoved the man into it. Dropping into the pit of darkness, Rory heard the King scream in terror at the creatures waiting within the dimension of shadows. Thankfully, Laura was unaware of his involvement in the disappearance, and likely murder, of King Creed. She harbored hopes of one day restoring King Creed to the throne.

Rory saw himself as the future new king of the restored city of Tolkeen.

Laura and Kent now stood within the ritual circle. Lukas dismissed the mercenaries who left the cavern wearing heavy armor, power armor suits and using the stolen Naruni hover tank.

Watching the mercenaries leave, Rory joined Lukas as the Necromancer made his way to the circle.

Standing within the circle, Rory flexed his reptilian muscles and prepared to join the group in casting their spells.

Turning from watching the mercenaries, Laura smiled at Rory, "We've done it. After this we will find our King and prepare to take Tolkeen back from the CS. We will restore the Ley Line Defense System, oust the demons that flock to Tolkeen, and reclaim our position as the greatest protectors of human and inhuman kind. The great dragons of Freehold will return to view our success and we will push the CS out."

Rory nodded, turning himself to see the last of their hired mercenaries file out of the cavern.

The twenty-two D-Bee mercenaries were comprised of many kinds of non-humans. They marched or flew out of the cave mouth in precise order. Their leader, a Greet named Chucklebones, was a seasoned veteran from many fights against the CS, both near Calgary and in Tolkeen. His second in command, a Larmac named Boogie, piloted the recently stolen Naruni hover tank.

Chucklebones reflected that the contract had already born fruit for his mercenary band. The addition of the Naruni Juggernaut Mark II to his company was a great boon. The tank was worth millions of credits itself, in addition to adding a powerful vehicle to their outfit. The Lizard Mage, Rory, had paid him 60 million up front. The promised 120 million after the day was done would soar the mercenary outfit to new heights. Dreaming of the new equipment and weapons they would buy, Chucklebones smirked.

Boogie radioed Chucklebones, "Straight ahead, Chuckles. Scouts. The Xiticix have scouts out. That will make our job easier."

Chucklebones nodded. "Yes. All forces, head for the scouts. Engage them. Make sure a few get away. We want to have them head back to the big hive for reinforcements."

Using the long range cannon on the J-2, Boogie fired at the scouts in the distance. The mercenaries continued across the rocky, alien ground of the Xiticix home world. Advancing on the scouts, the beams from several handheld energy rifles added to the attack. Swarming down at the mercenaries, the scouts took heavy losses from the well-armed D-Bees.

Tearing into the scouts with abandon, the mercenaries attacked with zeal. Chucklebones was caught up in the fight and forgot his need to have survivors amongst the scouts. Grinning with delight, Chucklebones fired round after round from his Kittani rail gun. It was Boogie who screamed across the radio to hold fire. There were only two injured Xiticix of the original seven they had engaged left.

Chucklebones pushed his instincts down and held fire. Joining Boogie on the radio, he called for his mercenaries to hold fire and regroup.

Chuckling, the mercenary leader watched as the remaining Xiticix flew back towards the big hive.

Slowly trailing the scouts, the D-Bees cheered and several cracked open bottles of Psi-Cola. Chucklebones took the offered cola from a comrade and joined his band in the cheers.

About a mile from the massive hive, they stopped and waited. It wasn't long until a great horde of Xiticix warriors burst up and out of the giant resin and red rock pillars. Choking on the remaining cola, Chucklebones watched as thousands upon thousands of angry Xiticix swarmed like a tide, blotting out the bluish sky, towards the mercenaries.

"Damn! They are seriously pissed," Boogie remarked.

Dropping the bottle of finished Psi-Cola, Chucklebones felt fear wriggling into his mind. There were so many!

"Back! Back to the cave! Boogie, keep firing on them as we go back!" Chucklebones screamed as he turned his hover jet bike around and bolted ahead of the rest of the mercenaries.

Leading the mercenaries towards the cave mouth, Chucklebones looked back over his shoulder and flew as fast as he could. The swarm was upon the mercenaries who were on foot. Tearing the hapless D-Bees apart, the majority of the swarm buzzed along after the mercenaries who had faster vehicles and power armor. Across the radio, he could hear Boogie screaming for help as the J-2 was swarmed by Xiticix warriors.

Chucklebones was sad at the loss of the tank, but just had to make it back into the cave and the promise of riches would be his.

Chapter Fourteen

Cross watched the blue D-Bee mage weave about and speak strange words. Feeling apprehensive from the last time he watched a mage cast a ritual spell to open a dimensional portal, he leaned closer to Soto and whispered, "I thank you once again for finishing Flint."

Soto grinned darkly. "Funny. I was just thinking about that particular Shifter too. Bang. One shot."

Standing in the dark of night, brightly illuminated by the nexus point, the five of them watched as Jimboy weaved his spell. Grel looked stoic and Radek appeared somewhat jittery, undoubtedly his drug harness was pumping chemicals through his body in preparation to act or react. Melissa looked worried and Soto was his usual calm self.

Cross leaned towards Melissa and quietly said, "Vur ha. It will be fine. Doesn't hurt a bit stepping through, like walking through a door between rooms."

Melissa smiled at Cross and took Soto's free hand, squeezing it.

Herjaza spoke to Cross, "Six is better than three. Go to the Xiticix home world, find the cave from Melissa's vision, fight your way to the ritual room, and stop the Rift from being opened and unleashing a horde of bugs into your CS city. Simple enough. I can feel the energy culminating, the Blue Mage will be done any moment."

Thinking back to her, Cross said, "Thank you. Here's hoping we all survive this."

Herjaza responded, "You have to. Volic still needs to be dealt with."

Out loud, Cross said, "Here we go," just prior to the Rift tearing open and showing the home world of the Xiticix on the other side.

Both Radek and Soto led them through.

Once all six of them were through the portal, Jimboy let go of the spell in his mind and the portal closed.

Jimboy pulled a long wand made of gnarled wood and wrapped in gold out of his cloak, saying, "My friends. That pretty much drained me. Don't expect too many more spells out of me today. I'm saving what energy I have left in me for emergencies. Let's go earn the right to have songs sung about us!"

Grel grumbled as he checked the clip inserted into his NE-50.

Melissa was looking off toward a low hill and at the cave entrance in the distance. Closing her eyes, she said, "It is just as I saw." Pointing to the cave, she continued, "That's where we need to go."

Soto yelled, "Good! Because I don't think we want to go the other way! Run! To the cave, run for it!"

Taking giant leaps backwards, Radek was facing away from the cave as he fired shots towards the speeding jet bike bearing down at them. Behind it was a massive swarm of Xiticix flying warriors.

Grel, Jimboy and Melissa ran for the cave's mouth. Stopping at the entrance, Grel turned back to fire his energy rifle towards the jet bike and several power armors following it.

Soto quickly walked backwards and, stopping for a moment, he aimed the JA-12 energy rifle at the jet bike. Lining up the sights to the JA-12 on the chest of the D-Bee riding it, he slowly lowered his aim down and to his right. Soto stopped breathing for a moment and his trigger finger slowly, almost lazily tightened on the trigger as bursts of rail gun fire erupted around him. The blast from the JA-12 flew across the space between him and the advancing jet bike. Hitting his target, the left handle bar of the jet bike, had a satisfactory outcome. Lowering the rifle, Soto watched as the D-Bee on the jet bike panicked and lost control of the vehicle. Careening into the ground at approximately one hundred miles per hour left the pilot flying through the air and landing unconscious or dead from the hard impact with stone and sand. The jet bike exploded and twisted into torn metal.

Crouching down, Cross saw a nearly invisible barrier form before him. He fired over the top of the protective barrier at an advancing power armor suit as bullets ricocheted off the force field.

Soto ran the rest of the distance to the cave mouth. Radek and Grel both covered his movement, firing out past Soto as he ran the distance.

Running into the cave mouth, Soto saw Melissa was covering their six, pointing her twin energy pistols down into the cave. Soto nodded at her, saying, "Good job thinking to watch out for our backside. Glad you're here, even though because

of you I ended up having to pay for storage on my hover-cycle." He winked at her.

"Ha. Our hovercycle now, bub." Melissa grinned and said, "This is so much more fun than running my own garage. Not."

With all five of them taking cover within the cave entrance, just Cross was taking fire from the two closest power armors.

Grel muttered aloud, "That is Grel's tank being swarmed. Goodbye, tank. Not happy."

The majority of the D-Bee mercenaries disappeared into the swarm of Xiticix warriors as it caught up with them. The large bug men tore into the mercenaries. Using their four arms, two legs and either resin swords or strange, Techno-Wizard rifles, the massive swarm devoured the mercs. Only two were left, both flying power armor suits. A Chipwell Warmonger suit with a jet pack and a much more dangerous suit of Mecha-Knight power armor.

The Warmonger power armor kicked his thrusters to top speed, ignoring Cross, and bolted directly towards the cave entrance. The five members of Reaper Company within opened fire on the lone mercenary. Between energy pistol, energy rifle and wand, they quickly whittled down the plate armor of the suit and punched lethal holes out the backside of the D-Bee. As it crashed close to the cave's mouth, they collectively sighed in relief and reloaded their weapons.

The other suit of power armor, the Mecha-Knight, shot straight towards Cross, unleashing a volley of particle beam fire. The energy blasts battered the protective barrier and Herjaza warned Cross that it was about to fail.

Cursing to himself, Cross muttered, "Of course the merc in crappy Chipwell power armor attacks the other five and I get to battle this ten foot tall, Naruni-built powerhouse. Crap!"

Cross rolled to his left, away from the swing of the large energy sword as it tore through the remainder of the protective barrier.

"Ronan Saint Cross! Don't you dare die here! We have work to do, hon. Both here and after," Herjaza spoke in his mind.

"By all the gods I don't believe in, Herjaza! If you want me to live, help out!" Cross yelled.

"Oh! Did you take dancing lessons, Ronan? You're pretty good at weaving about and dodging his strikes. Look out!" the silver sword said.

Cross dodged to his left, just barely avoiding the slash of the energy sword. Swinging Herjaza up and to his right with his right hand, the silver blade bounced off of the side of the Mecha-Knight's helmet.

The D-Bee pilot stepped back from Cross and aimed its big rifle at him. Cross dropped and rolled into the feet of the power armor as a barrage of energy streamed out. As he pointed his C-20 energy pistol up at the power armor, the D-Bee grabbed the barrel in its left hand. Cross pulled the trigger and energy blasted into the armored grip of the Mecha-Knight, but he saw that the damage was minimal. The D-Bee wrenched the pistol out of Cross's hand with augmented strength, and swung its energy sword down at him. Down to just Herjaza, Cross held the hilt of the silver sword with both hands and swung her up to block the attack.

The two swords slammed into each other. The force of the blow knocked Cross down, but the energy blade was blocked by Herjaza. Scurrying across the dusty ground around and behind the tall suit of power armor, Cross stood up as the D-Bee turned around to face him.

A bolt of energy tore out of the silver blade and crackled around the helmet of the Mecha-Knight.

"That's all I have for you right now, Ronan. I'm conserving the rest of my energy. I suggest you concentrate on his helmet," Herjaza calmly stated.

As the Mecha-Knight swiveled the gun mounted on its left shoulder towards Cross, more energy blasts scattered out towards him.

The D-Bee lifted the energy sword up high in preparation of slashing it down at Cross.

Cross yelled, "Vur ha!" and jumped straight at the power armor. Holding Herjaza up high with his right hand, he used his feet and left hand to grapple onto the suit of armor and climb up the front of it.

The D-Bee yelled across the loudspeaker of the Mecha-Knight, "Get off me, you stupid human!"

The bottom of the energy sword's hilt crashed down onto Cross's back. Ignoring the pain of the impact, Cross hooked his left hand around the shoulder of the Mecha-Knight, wedging his feet around the waist of the power armor between the back of the suit and the attached jet pack.

Slamming his right hand down, smashing the blade of Herjaza into the face plate of the Mecha-Knight over and over, he screamed at the top of his lungs, "Die, bastard!"

After several blows from Herjaza, the face plate split open and Cross continued to smash the silver blade into the D-Bee's face.

Toppling backwards, the Mecha-Knight lay on its backside as Cross continued to hit the power armor with Herjaza.

Slowly, Cross realized Herjaza was yelling at him in his mind. Becoming aware of an intense pain in his right side, he slid off the destroyed power armor onto his back and placed his hand to his armored ribs. There were dents in the cracked armor. The D-Bee must have punched him in the side multiple times.

Grunting in pain from cracked ribs, Cross unfastened the ruined Juicer plate armor he was wearing and let it fall to the ground.

Finally, he listened to Herjaza. "Ronan! Run! The swarm is coming. They're almost here!"

Looking up while lying prone on his back, he saw thousands of Xiticix warriors angrily buzzing down towards him. He wasn't going to make it to the cave in time.

"Son of a..." Cross said as he shakily stood up. Radek skidded to a stop next to him. The Juicer said, "That was crazier than two rattlesnakes arm wrestling! This isn't going to be dignified, RC, but you don't get a say in the matter right now."

Tossing Cross over his shoulder, the Juicer ran as fast as he was able across the ground, leaving a cloud of dust billowing out behind him like the wake of a jet screaming over water.

Bursting into the cave mouth, Radek yelled, "Move, people! Go, go, go!"



* * *

Laura opened her eyes as she chanted the last words of her spell. Glancing around, she saw Rory was finishing his spell, too. The Necromancer Dwarf stood before the two lifeless and gutted CS soldiers with blood smeared across his two short daggers. Kent stood just outside the large ritual circle, giggling.

Suddenly, Rory exclaimed, "Yes!" as the dimensional portal crackled open, revealing the inside of Chi-Town. "It's done! Where are the Xiticix and mercenaries?"

Kent looked out towards the tunnel leading outside, "Well. Here comes someone."

Rory pointed at the Necromancer. "Now."

* * *

Rushing into the large cavern, the members of Reaper Company spread out and took in the scene.

Two animated corpses dressed in torn and bloody, CS dark blue fatigues violently tore into a man who was screaming as he was beaten to death. A short Dwarf dressed in black attire appeared to be directing the two dead men.

The six members of Reaper Company fanned out, pointing pistols, rifles, sword and wand at the three mages. Cross, shirtless with deep red bruises spreading across his ribs and stomach, stepped forward, pointing the silver sword at the trio.

Cross said, "Close the portal!"

Rory and Laura looked at each other, then back at Cross. Laura smiled as Rory said, "You are too late. I can see the swarm of Xiticix behind you." Turning his reptilian head towards Laura, the Lizard Man continued, "Sorry, Laura. I killed King Creed."

Laura's smile vanished, "What...?"

Rory vanished a split second before the blast ripped outwards from Soto's JA-12, piercing the air where the Lizard Man had been standing.

Laura screamed, "No!"

The Necromancer said, "Hey?"

Soto cursed, "Damn Shifters."

Cross saw the two dead CS soldiers start to advance towards them and stepped closer to meet them. Slashing Herjaza twice, he cut each dead man in half.

Jimboy yelled, "Get over by the wall, heroes! I'm casting a protective barrier!"

They all moved as fast as they could, except Radek, to converge by the cave wall next to the Blue Mage as the Xiticix screamed into the cavern.

Radek bolted past Cross towards the Dwarven Necromancer. The little man was casting a spell of some kind when Radek kicked him squarely in the gut. With a grunt of pain, his spell forgotten, the Necromancer spun through the air, plummeting towards the open portal disappearing.

Tears in her eyes, Laura ran towards Jimboy crying, "Please..."

Grelc punched her in the mouth and she staggered back away from Jimboy. Falling down onto her backside, she sat in the ritual circle, shaking her head, still dazed from the hit.

Radek raced for the wall, rolling across the ground as Jimboy erected the faintly glowing barrier of protection.

Thousands of Xiticix burst into the area, but unable to penetrate the magic barrier they slid across the invisible wall, screeching and moving as one massive body of bug men. Converging upon Laura, she was torn to shreds by the mass of angry Xiticix, her brief screams unheard over the chittering and screeches of the Xiticix.

Holding his side in pain, Cross yelled to be heard above the pounding of the Xiticix on the barrier, "We have to close that portal! Xiticix are pouring into Chi-Town!"

Jimboy said, "I'm afraid that my barrier won't last much longer. I can cast a Close Rift spell but I literally will be drained of energy then. Our song ends here, friends."

Grel muttered, "Figures."

Melissa cried, "Please, Jimboy. Close the Rift. So many people are going to die!"

Nodding, the Unbeholden stood straight and began his spell.

Cross thought, "Any ideas?"

Herjaza replied, "Of course. Just waiting for Jimboy to do his part, Ronan."

The Blue Mage cast his spell and sunk back against the cave wall. Soto helped the mage sit instead of fall.

"Thank you, Jimboy," Soto said, turning to look at the swarm of thousands of Xiticix with nowhere to go. The portal closed, and they turned en masse towards the six and angrily assaulted the rapidly weakening barrier.

Radek grinned. "Well, I'd say it was fun, but, you know."

Cross snorted. Nodding his head up and down, the others looked at him. Cross had that faraway look as he muttered, "Okay." Louder, Cross commanded, "Everyone hold hands, now!"

The barrier of protection collapsed and the Xiticix swarmed towards them.

Chapter Fifteen

Rory crouched down and ran his claws through the pitch dirt. He had intended to Rift to one of his hidden sanctuaries located under the ruins of Tolkeen. Instead, he found himself here.

To be precise, he had arrived in his sanctuary, but was then pulled here. He might have been able to stop the shifting but was interested to see what force was pulling him sideways through dimensions. Standing back up, he looked around. Darkness. A path with small rocks lined up on either side of it. There was a faint, red light in the distance. Against such darkness it was brilliant.

Rory then realized it was two red lights, which were, in fact, two red eyes. Rory mentally reached out and took hold of the ambient energy around him, bending it to his will. Even though he saw no nexus or Ley Line, it felt as if he were standing at a nexus. Using the energy, he cast Armor of Ithan around himself.

The creature that slowly approached him was a Shadow Beast. Unlike the usual tall, thin, humanoid Shadow Beasts, this one resembled a Hell Hound and walked on all fours. He knew it for what it was, not a demon from Hell but a denizen of the Shadowlands.

Rory ran the first part of a banishment spell through his mind, deciding to hold off on casting it quite yet. Something in the beast's manner suggested it wouldn't attack him.

Stopping twenty off feet away from him on the path, the hound said, "The Master wishes to speak to you."

Running several snarky retorts through his mind, Rory was unable to use any. The beast turned away and padded back along the path in the direction it had come from.

Frowning, Rory thought, "Why not?" and followed behind the hound.

Soon, walking along next to the Shadow Hound, Rory could make out the shape of a toppled, dark wooden tower laying broken and across the path. At its base was a set of unbroken doors.

"Inside" the hound offered before dissipating into the shadows.

Rory remarked, "Thanks and bye, I guess."

Stepping towards the doors, he felt the presence of great supernatural evil.

Steeling himself, Rory was angry at his fear. This was stupid he thought. I am a Shifter! I fear no creature. Stepping up to the doors in defiance of his fear, he pushed them open and walked into a dark room illuminated by many white candles on several altars.

Despite his resolve, Rory fell to his knees and wept in fright.

Standing before him was a scarred, albino-looking human in dark robes. Piercing blue eyes looked down at Rory from under a black and shadowy hood.

Pain lanced through Rory's body and his Armor of Ithan faltered.

The commanding voice of the albino held Rory enraptured. "You will know your place. I will lift you up to stand below me. I am Volic, and I have great things for you to do."

Writhing in pain, Rory meekly replied, "Yes. Master."

Chapter Sixteen

"What is it with this lake, Herjaza? Don't get me wrong, I'm super thankful for the portal and quick escape, but why here?" asked Cross.

Sitting up in the water, Cross looked around at the rest of his team. Seeing that they were all here, he relaxed.

Herjaza spoke in his mind, "If you want a specific location, hon, you need to ask. These rapid dimensional teleports are tiring. Let me rest."

Cross stood up, holding his injured side, thinking, "Thank you, Herjaza."

Radek jumped up from the water and soared over Cross, landing on the bank of the lake. Taking up a defensive position, he kept the others covered as they each slowly stood up and sloughed through the water towards him.

Soto half-carried Melissa to the bank as Cross helped the squat Blue Mage make his way out of the water. Panting heavily, Jimboy let Cross help him.

"Thank you, RC. I'm beat. Tuckered. Hungry. If we are safe, I'll set up a fire. Get a meal cooking," Jimboy huffed.

Grelic stood in the water watching the others, "I fine. I help myself, don't worry. How did I get mixed up with these people?" Trudging through the water, Grelic assisted Cross in hauling Jimboy up onto the bank.

"What next?" asked Grel.

Cross remarked, "According to Jimboy, dinner's next. But after that, we could head towards Ft. Whitefish Falls."

Jimboy huffed, "That's a Coalition fort!"

Cross nodded, "Yes. But the CS doesn't know it was us they have to thank for closing that Rift, so we can't all head in. Outside of their base is a mercantile shop. Place called Wheel-er's. Soto and I can head in, buy provisions and more food. Then we can head out. Not sure where yet."

Radek nodded, "Okay. We just saved Chi-Town from a worse invasion. Soto mentioned this is CS territory so we should tread carefully. For now, I find myself unsure where I will eventually head towards. I'm retired from Markeen. As long as you are not headed to New San Antonio in Texas, I'll tag along with you guys if that's cool."

Soto laughed. "Yeah. I'm sick of Texas and New Mexico. Let's head to Ft. Whitefish Falls and get supplies. Then see what we see."

Jimboy sighed, "Walking all the way there? Oh dear, this is going to cause hell on my physique. I'm going to have to eat twice as much as normal if I'm going to stay round."

Melissa sat down next to Grelic and Jimboy as the Blue Mage prepared a fire. "Can I help?"

Jimboy smiled. "Of course, Pretty Lady."

Melissa asked, "Do we have any way of knowing where the Lizard Man, Shifter, went?"

Jimboy sighed, "No. I couldn't tell."

Radek noticed RC nod at Soto.

Soto said, "I'm going to see if I can hunt down some game. If we are walking, we'll likely want the extra meat. Back soon."

As Soto made his way out of camp, Radek motioned Cross over.

"What say you, the two of us scout out the area? Make sure we have a safe perimeter," Radek said.

Looking up from the budding fire, Jimboy said, "I'll set up some magical warnings after I get dinner going."

Cross nodded at the Blue Mage, then followed Radek out away from the bank of the lake into the dense forest.

After a few minutes of walking away in a different direction than Soto had gone, Cross said, "You seem like you have a burning question, Radek. Ask."

The Juicer brushed some snow off an overturned tree and sat down. Looking up at Cross, Radek smiled. "As a matter of fact, RC... I was wondering, even though you carry a Rune sword, Soto has leather armor as strong as my Bushman Trooper armor, and he's sporting two stolen demon blade pistols, are you guys ex-CS?"

Herjaza chuckled.

Cross sighed and looked around at the snow, trees and rocks. Picking a rock, he sat down to face the Juicer.

“Why do you think we are ex-CS? I told you I used to pilot a Glitter Boy. Maybe I’m from Quebec or M.I. Or former Northern Gun. Why the leap to us being Coalition?” asked Cross.

Radek shrugged, “I was there. At Newtown, I mean. When the whole Vallax fiasco occurred. I wasn’t there to get the Phoenix chip. I was looking for the JAL. Wanted to join the Juicer Army of Liberation. Did join them for a short while. I captured, well a few of us, captured a whole CS squad and took them back to camp. Mostly they were frightened, but one guy wasn’t. I think he must have been Special Forces or something. He said something to the other regular grunts. It stuck out to me because it made no sense to me but I saw how it gave the others hope.”

Cross nodded. “What did he say, Radek?”

Radek shrugged, “Something like Vurha.”

Cross chuckled, “Oh, that. Damn. It’s Vur ha and it isn’t used by Special Forces. That’s a CS Commando saying.”

Radek nodded. “Look, I’m not saying I’ve got an issue with you if you are prior CS. I just don’t want to be, or have the others be, in some kind of unknown danger.”

Cross smiled. “Fair enough. Soto, Melissa and I are ex-CS. We each left on good terms with the Coalition. We aren’t wanted fugitives or any such thing. I set up Reaper Company as a potential mercenary group. I’ll work for anyone with an honest and moral need. Be it a village, the CS, whoever. We were just getting under way when Melissa had the vision. I want to thank you for helping us close the Rift and saving CS lives. But know this, if the same event were about to happen to a non-CS place, I’d do the same thing. Although getting paid would’ve been nice.”

Radek nodded. “Alright. I can work with that.”

Cross smiled and released the plasma grenade back into his interior pocket and pulled his hands out of his old military jacket.

“Look, Radek, I’m pretty partial to Herjaza, the sword. My days as a CS Commando are over. From here on out we are in the wild. No more CS cities, no retirement, just whatever we can make out of Reaper Company. I picked Ft. Whitefish Falls because of the non-CS outpost, Wheeler’s. However, if I happen to hear of a well-paying job being funded by the CS, I’ll take it as long as it’s morally sound. OK?”

Radek stood up, saying, “Yup. Good by me. At some point I’m heading west, all the way west, but until that day, I am good with some more freelance work.”

Herjaza spoke to Cross, “Well that’s about as close to the truth as you could get without actually blowing your cover. Oh, and... Thanks, hon. I’m... partial to you, too.”

Chapter Seventeen

Captain Lawrence Kief, ISS Specter and member of the Chi-Town Peacekeepers, stood in the alley way, dressed in leather pants, combat boots and a sleeveless, dirty white shirt.

Twirling a set of nunchucks, Kief looked like a typical low-life thug. Thanks to his AA-1 Cyber-Disguise, he looked like a younger, pastier, drugged-out version of his real features. Bored, he tucked the nunchucks into the back of his pants and leaned out of the mouth of the alley to look at the city park. The park had the illusion of being outside, although the bright sunshine streaming down was really just video screens and lamps. It was well designed, and almost looked real. For many, it was the closest they had ever seen to the real sky. This park was on a more affluent level of Chi-Town.

Hanging out in the dark alley was part of his job today. Kief, sometimes called the Spider of Chi-Town, had clearance to visit most levels and often was outside in the ‘Burbs. Today he was supposed to be making contact with some individuals who lived and worked on this level. They had become greedy and were making extra money manufacturing drugs that they sold to the less fortunate. Kief, going by an alias of Mickey Roberts, had spent the better part of a month working undercover as the lowlife who would take over buying from these individuals and supposedly then selling the drugs off to those on poorer levels.

Kief waited patiently for them to arrive. Once they delivered the goods, he and a well-hidden Peacekeeper team would arrest them. Looking out at the multitude of people playing and hanging out in the park, Kief absently thought about how busy the park was today, even for a weekend. So many good people, families out with their children, playing in the manufactured park. Sighing, he wondered why others, who had it so good, would become so greedy as to make and sell drugs. Human nature, he supposed. Job security too. The two guys Kief was waiting for would soon be imprisoned and their immediate families ousted from Chi-Town.

Kief looked back out at the park when he heard screams. Unlike the playful screams of children having fun, he could now hear screams of terror.

“The hell?” Kief muttered.

Kief saw several people pointing up towards the fake sky. Following their horrified gazes, Kief looked up and cursed again.

Other than some of the hidden Peacekeepers, he was probably one of the few people who actually realized what was happening. The mock sky was becoming blotted out by an enormous tear in reality.

Kief heard one of the Peacekeepers on his hidden ear mic say, “Mother of Prosek! You seeing this Spider? A Rift!”

Stunned by the appearance of the Rift opening up inside of Chi-Town, Kief kicked the metal wall of the alley. A portion of the wall fell off and landed on the dirty floor. The well-hidden compartment had a locker behind its pretend metal wall. Kief coded in a sequence of numbers into the electro-lock and a moment later, pulled out an armored long coat, put it on, then pulled out a C-27 Light Plasma Cannon, which he slung

across his back. He reached back into the locker, pulled out a holster with a C-18 laser pistol, clicked it on, and then grabbed the last item in the locker. The CR-1 Rocket Launcher was able to fire any standard CS mini-missile, but it was loaded with one tear gas missile right now. Ejecting the mini-missile and letting it fall to the ground, Kief set the Rocket Launcher down and reached into the locker with both hands. Pulling as hard as he could, he tore the locker out and grabbed the illegally concealed frag missile. It wasn't as powerful as a plasma missile, but was better than gas. Loading the Rocket Launcher, he peered back out from the alley.

Kief saw the people in the park were staring up at the Rift. Panicked and in shock, most of the adults were still staring stupidly up while some children ran about screaming.

Kief yelled into his hidden radio, "Sergeant Bowman! Call HQ for a level one security team! Get your butts out there and prepare to fight whatever comes out of that Rift!"

Stepping out of the alley, Kief screamed at the top of his lungs, "Run!"

He saw the two guys who he was supposed to meet with looking at him in bewilderment. Kief had a short-lived desire to blast them both; his cover was blown and justice was being interfered with. Grumbling to himself, he muttered, "No. I'll catch them the right way another day."

Pointing the C-18 at the ground about thirty feet away from the crowd, he shot twice. Chunks of steel and concrete, along with green artificial turf, exploded. The crowd reacted, screaming and running away from Kief and the park.

Looking up, Kief saw that the Rift was opened up completely now, spanning a width of about sixty feet by twenty feet. As he gazed up into it, his amplified hearing detected Sgt. Bowman and the other nine CS Peacekeepers running up behind him. Looking into the Rift was dizzying, since even though he was under it, it appeared to be opened level with the ground on the other side. The physics of it made his head hurt.

The ten Peacekeepers positioned themselves around Kief and pointed their heavy weapons up towards the Rift. Unlike Kief, they at least were all wearing full environmental, ISS old-style Dead Boy armor. Only Babs, a female, genetically created, Lab Psi-Hound, was without a helmet.

Most of the population in the area had cleared out. Somewhere in the distance a siren was wailing. Kief's augmented hearing was tuning it out, but he was sure it was loud as hell for everyone else.

Sgt. Bowman said, "Reinforcements state they are five out, Sir!"

Kief could see a mass of inhuman movement in the tunnel on the other side of the Rift, rapidly approaching the portal.

Babs asked, "What is it?"

Kief had seen these before when he worked in Iron Heart a long time ago. "Xiticix," he stated.

The angry horde of Xiticix swarmed across the portal's opening and erupted into the sky above the park located inside of Chi-Town.

Kief yelled, "Fire!"

Blasts of energy rifles shot upwards from the eleven CS Peacekeepers. The trail of smoke streaking from the CR-1

Rocket Launcher trailed upwards and the frag mini-missile struck a Xiticix in its chest. Body parts exploded down towards them as the mass of Xiticix continued to stream through the Rift.

Blast after blast was fired upwards at the mass of Xiticix pouring through the Rift into Chi-Town.

Some of the massive alien bugs zipped about and tore into the slower to react population. Most of the Xiticix centered their attention on the eleven CS Peacekeepers who presented the only threat to them.

"What the hell?" muttered Sgt. Bowman as a Dwarf of a man dressed in black robes fell down through the portal screaming. The Dwarf hit the ground with a crunch and was obviously dead from the fall.

Kief spun away from the form of a Xiticix that plummeted down towards him and landed heavily where he had been standing just a moment ago. Kief tossed the now empty Rocket Launcher at the Xiticix who swatted it away. Pulling the slung C-27 around, he opened fire on the bug. Hot plasma ejected across its chest. A dozen more Xiticix landed in amongst the Peacekeepers.

Turning to his left, Kief felt the impact of an alien-looking sword smash into his right side. The impact hurtled him ten feet across the ground and he landed heavily on his back. Winded from the strike, he groaned in pain, realizing his right arm was broken. Red spots exploded across his vision as he groaned and looked up at the open Rift. It looked like hundreds more of the creatures were scurrying through the tunnel toward the open portal. Suddenly, without warning, the portal closed. Several Xiticix were caught partway through when it closed, and three lifeless bodies plummeted downwards.

Thank goodness for that, he thought as pain arced through his body. Babs knelt down next to Kief and jabbed a needle into his chest. With an explosion of energy, Kief no longer felt any pain. Babs helped him stand up, practically lifting him up entirely by herself, until he was standing again.

Looking about, Kief assessed the situation around them. Only four of the eleven Peacekeepers were still alive. Xiticix swarmed about angrily and fired bolts of energy out of their alien rifles or slashed out at people with wicked blades.

Two Peacekeepers were dodging about trying to fire into the swarm. Sgt. Bowman was locked in a wrestling match with a large Xiticix. Babs was running towards the Sergeant with her Vibro-Knife out to help him. Kief stumbled and looked around for the C-27. Seeing it laying on the ground near where he had been hit, he ran towards it.

Lifting up the C-27 with his left hand, his right arm hanging uselessly down to his side, Kief propped the butt of the Plasma Ejector into his hip and fired wildly at several Xiticix.

Without warning, and dropping down from above, a Xiticix landed directly in front of Kief. Backhanded by two of the creatures' hands, Kief tumbled backwards, his shots going wide. Once again laying on his backside, Kief was having trouble getting up while holding the C-27 left-handed. He tried to use his right arm, there was no pain, but it refused to work correctly and was bent in the wrong direction. Kief could see the Xiticix that had swatted him advanc-

ing towards him. Using just his feet, Kief kicked his way backwards, away from the Xiticix. Firing the Plasma Cannon left-handed, he managed to hit the creature twice out of four shots.

Jumping into the air, the Xiticix soared towards him. Kief pulled the trigger twice before realizing the C-27 was empty. Kicking his way backwards more, he dropped the C-27 and rolled to his right, just as the Xiticix pounced down on top of him. Deftly reaching across his body with his left hand, he pulled the C-18 out of the holster on his right hip. He was holding the energy pistol upside down when he pushed it upwards into the open mandibles of the Xiticix's mouth. As it bit down, he fired the gun with his pinky.

At first, Kief just saw the head of the Xiticix rip backwards. Falling back away from him, he grinned and straightened his arm out to fire at the bug. Then he saw that not only was the gun gone, his left hand was bitten off at the wrist. He felt no pain still, but his stomach churned as he looked at his bloody wrist.

Shoving his bleeding left wrist into his side, trying to slow the blood loss, Kief decided he had done what he could. Now it was time to run, hard and fast, away from the fight.

Running towards the alley he had originally come out of, Kief stopped dead in his tracks as a Xiticix landed about twenty feet away from him. Facing Kief and blocking his path to the alley, the monstrosity advanced towards the ISS Specter.

Still sick to his stomach, Kief was amazingly clear-headed, a byproduct of the drug Babs had injected him with. He could feel the blood coursing through his body and out of his bloody wrist.

As the Xiticix advanced on him, Kief reached back behind his back and used his bleeding wrist to lift up the nunchucks. Lifting them out of his waistline, he let them fall to the ground and stepped back one step behind them. Keeping his eyes glued on the advancing monster, Kief hooked his right boot tip under the nunchucks.

"This isn't going to work," Kief mumbled. As if on cue from him muttering, the Xiticix pounced forward, holding the large, alien sword out in front of it. Kief kicked the nunchucks up and out at the Xiticix and screamed at the top of his lungs. Distracted for just the smallest of moments, the Xiticix watched the object spinning towards it. Kief was right behind the spinning nunchucks and as the Xiticix slammed forward, Kief threw his body into the Xiticix. Colliding together, they both tumbled down, with the larger, heavier Xiticix on top of Kief.

Kief was elated to see the monster had dropped the sword as they tumbled to the ground. The nunchucks were caught in the mouth of the Xiticix. Spitting them out, the bug jumped up to its feet. Kief had disarmed the damn bug, but he knew it could still tear his body apart with supernatural strength. He burst into laughter as the Xiticix reached out for him.

The big bug stopped moving, its multifaceted eyes looking down at Kief, who was roaring with laughter. A moment later, it pounced at Captain Lawrence Kief and exploded into

icky fragments of goo and body parts. Slowly and unsteadily, Kief managed to stand up and watch as the level one rapid response tactical team rushed into the area. Soldiers were suddenly everywhere, on foot and piloting SAMAS power armor.

After a minute or two, the SAMs and response team troops were done killing the last of the big bugs. They organized into search parties and systematically started looking for any other possible threats in the area.

Kief dropped into a sitting position and felt dizzy.

Two CS Combat Medics ran over to Kief as he looked at his ten fellow Peacekeepers. They were all dead. Their bodies thrown about, torn, bloody and dismembered. Kief tried saluting them with his bloody stump of a left wrist since he couldn't move his shattered right arm. The medics told him to hold still, and as he slowly blacked out, his last thoughts were of the ten dead bravest men and woman Psi-Hound he had ever known, and thankful the Rift had somehow been closed before more of the Xiticix could make it into Chi-Town.

Epilogue

Colonel Hunter finished listening to the audio report transcribed by the injured ISS Specter known as the Spider. Captain Lawrence Kief had been in surgery for hours upon hours after the Xiticix attack on Chi-Town. Turning off the recording, Hunter looked across his desk at Colonel Lyboc.

"You vouch for this man? You think he would be a possible candidate for the Cell teams, Thaddius?" asked Hunter.

Lyboc laughed, "Personally, I hate him. Kief hates me, too. But yes. As long as you keep my name out of your pitch to him, I think he could be a good addition to our project. He is somewhat of a goody goody fellow, morals are all principled, but I think he can be pushed a little and will end up serving our needs. He's almost more machine than man now, and my sources say he's mad as hell. Mad at those responsible for unleashing the bugs on Chi-Town. His days as an undercover Specter are over, and I bet all my service ribbons he will want to still serve the CS."

Colonel Hunter grunted, "Well in any case, we need to decide who we want to blame for this incident. It may well have just been a small group of mages from Tolkeen, but we need to decide who needs the blame. I'm leaning towards saying it's the Minions of Hell who did it. Your thoughts?"

Colonel Thaddius Lyboc leaned back in his chair, grinning. "Well now. that's a good question."

Part Three:

Retributions

“A body of men holding themselves accountable to nobody ought not to be trusted by anybody.” – Thomas Paine

Prologue

Evening, June 22nd, 107 P.A.

Laredo, Texas, Rifts Earth.

Mikkel Alexander Radeksen lived in a world where fractures in space and time tore through reality and opened doors to supernatural realms, strange dimensions and alien worlds. Somehow, in a world gone crazy, around 300 years after an apocalypse, he'd never been more than maybe a hundred miles away from Laredo Texas.

In the Freelands of Texas, there were frequent portals, or Rifts from which hordes of demons and monsters, dragons and creatures of magic, the undead and aliens from countless places across the Megaverse erupted.

Laredo had its fair share of Dimensional Beings, or D-Bees. In fact, even though Mikkel himself was human, both of his parents were considered D-Bees. He knew he was adopted, it was painfully obvious, and his parents looked like a cross between humans and some kind of an alien octopus. Not that it bothered him that his parents were a different species than him, it only bothered him that his biological parents had left him behind in the world when they died. That had been when he was the age of four.

Mikkel's adoptive father, Tygin, had kindly told Mikkel the story of his biological father anytime he was asked over the years. After he became a young teenager, Mikkel stopped asking to hear the story when he realized the pain it caused Tygin.

Tygin and Mikkel's father had been great friends long ago and Mikkel learned over the years that retelling the story to him caused Tygin to become sad at the loss of his friend.

So it was that Mikkel's biological father's name hadn't been spoken in nearly six years. It was late one evening that Mikkel's adoptive mother, Tissa, had brought up the fact that young Mikkel, now 17, looked just like his father.

Mikkel and his adoptive parents lived above Tygin's shop in the middle of Laredo. The shop was run by both Tygin and Mikkel, a general store offering a wide array of goods from furs and leathers to foodstuff to recharging energy clips. They struggled to make ends meet and it was the energy clip recharging that really kept the store afloat. In the wild and dangerous gang-infested town, the need to recharge energy clips seemed to never go out of fashion. All sorts of seedy individuals in town and passing through could see the large neon sign, larger in fact than the sign stating Tygin's Mercantile, propped over the small two story building which read, E-Clips Recharged Here.

Mikkel had made the neon sign years ago during his short-lived apprenticeship at Bobby's Garage. Mikkel loved vehicles. The faster, the better. High-speed armored APCs, retrofitted old-world cars and hovercycles were his passion. The combination of his poor reading ability, vehicle semantics and repair manuals were beyond him, and Tygin needing help at the mercantile had ended the apprenticeship.

Besides that, Tammatha had moved to town. Tammatha was a four-armed vision of beauty, who not only was fluent in English and several other languages, she was literate too. Tammatha was a psychic mechanic, or Operator, who could touch any machine and instantly know how to fix it. Bobby hadn't fired Mikkel after hiring her but had been glad when Tygin had requested his son return to the mercantile.

From 15 to 17, Mikkel had passed his time working with Tygin and doing his best to stay out of any of the many gangs in town who constantly told him he needed to choose a faction. Uninterested in the violence the gangs participated in, the allure of adventuring did interest him.

According to his parents, his biological parents had been adventurers who had crossed the Atlantic Ocean from Europe to Texas, somewhere along the line, both Tygin and Tissa had been rescued from being slaves in Atlantis. After arriving in Laredo, they had all planned on continuing westward across America.

The plan died when Mikkel's biological parents were killed by a strange, demonic, scarred white man and several of the man's inhuman minions. They had arrived in the area, attacked the town of Laredo thirteen years ago and taken several people prisoner. His parents had helped prevent greater losses to the population but were killed by the demonic man who had fled through a magic portal afterwards. All that was known of the demonic man was that he was albino like a Psi-Stalker and had thankfully never returned to the Laredo area.

Sitting at the dinner table in their home above the shop, Tygin looked from his wife to Mikkel. Nodding, his many mandibles fluttered as he prepared to speak, "Yes. Our boy looks a lot like his father did. Maybe just a tad bit uglier though."

Tissa and Mikkel laughed.

Seeing that his father was already starting to look lost in thought, undoubtedly from the loss of his friend, Mikkel quickly changed the subject.

"Father? I was meaning to ask you earlier but we got so busy today I never did. Tomorrow is Tammatha's twenty first birthday. Would it be okay if I had the day off? Aimon and I wanted to drive with Tammatha to New San Antonio. Bobby is sending her there to buy parts he needs. Before you say no, Tammatha is going there in Bobby's armored Mountaineer ATV and Aimon is going to be with us!" Mikkel said.

Tissa smiled and said, "Is Aimon going to fit in the ATV?"

Aimon was a young Titan and easily twice as tall as Mikkel who was six feet tall himself. Both Aimon and Mikkel had been friends since they were both eight. Tammatha was older than them but still their closest friend.

Mikkel knew Tygin wouldn't be very excited with him going 150 miles away, through dangerous land, to the city ruled by Warlord Don Marco but he kept his fingers crossed.



Tygin growled, as he did so often when thinking, before looking back to Tissa.

Mikkel knew that his parents were speaking to each other. They were able to communicate mentally and he once again wished he could hear their thoughts and conversations.

After a moment, Tygin shrugged, his mandibles wiggling about and Mikkel knew the mannerism, jumping up, he said, "Thank you, father! I promise we will be safe and we will return by nightfall!"

Morning, June 23rd, 107 P.A.

Laredo, Texas, Rifts Earth.

The Mountaineer ATV was painted in dark camouflage and had several layers of armor plating added to it, offering additional protection. Tammatha had fixed the ATV last summer when a band of Mercenaries had limped the vehicle into town. They had requested repairs to the vehicle but balked at the price. They opted to ditch the ATV at Bobby's Garage in exchange for a working jeep. Hightailing it out of town, the mercenaries never returned. Mikkel wondered if that was because they had made it away or if the Coalition States troops who passed through town soon after had caught up to them.

Regardless of their fate, Tammatha had spent last summer fixing the ATV on her off time and it was now in working order.

Mikkel carried his bag across his shoulder and walked awkwardly towards the big, eighteen foot tall, three-wheeled armored ATV. Dressed in 22 pounds of black, heavy Bushman Trooper armor, Mikkel walked uncomfortably towards the ATV. The armor had been given to him by his parents on his 16th birthday and he cherished the expensive armor. He'd only worn it a few times considering how often he polished it and dreamed about adventuring in it. Tygin had insisted Mikkel take the family's only owned weapon with him. Usually Tygin kept the pistol concealed on his person but said he would be fine without the NG-45LP energy pistol for a day. Strapped to his hip in a new leather holster, borrowed from the shelf in the mercantile, Mikkel moved closer to the ATV. He saw Aimon leaning against the vehicle.

Aimon looked down at Mikkel and whistled, "Damn you look dangerous, Mikkel. You look like a real mercenary in that armor."

Grinning, Mikkel glanced around looking for Tammatha; not seeing her, he turned to Aimon and pointed at his own right hip, saying, "I even got my father's NG-45 LP. I got five spare clips, too."

Aimon whistled again, "Nice. I can't believe Tygin said yes to you going."

Mikkel laughed, "I think it was my mother who said yes and Tygin went along with it. You look like a Merc too in that polished silver plate armor. What weapons are you bringing?"

Aimon pointed at the rear of the ATV, "I have my sword in the back and if I need a gun, I'll use the top-mounted rail gun. I'm glad Tammatha converted the rear cargo area with an open roof so I can sit back there."

Mikkel asked, "Where is the birthday girl?"

Aimon pointed back towards Bobby's and said, "She's getting the trailer ready so we can haul it behind us to New San Antonio. Man, this trip is only going to be about one and a half to two hours but I'm excited to get out of Laredo."

Mikkel nodded, "Me too. Let's go see if Tam needs any help."

"Right!" said Aimon. "I want to hit the road."

Afternoon, June 23rd, 107 P.A.

Between Laredo and New San Antonio, Texas, Rifts Earth.

"Man, I'm glad Bobby let us borrow these old walkie-talkies! Otherwise I'd get bored sitting back here by myself," Aimon laughed across the radio.

Tammatha laughed back, saying, "Rodger dodger. I hear you loud and clear, you poor, big, scared to be alone, boy!"

Mikkel grinned as he looked out the front windows. Watching the landscape rush by was amazing. With the front passenger window down it felt even faster than the sixty mph Tam was driving at with the wind howling.

Mikkel glanced at Tammatha with wind-streaked tears in his eyes. He tried not to stare at her inappropriately as she drove like a bat out of hell. Tam had two of her four hands on the wheel. Her other right hand was holding a walkie-talkie. She had her other left arm and hand out the open driver window, moving it up and down like a bird in the wind.

Looking over at him, Tam said, "Whatcha' looking at, Mikkel?"

Mikkel's face flushed and he replied, "Nothing. It's awesome that you can drive with two hands on the wheel and still have two hands free to do whatever."

Tam laughed again and lightly punched him in his chest with her free right hand, saying, "Benefit of good genes. Rahu genes, baby! But seriously, Mikkel. What were you looking at?"

Mikkel looked back out the front window. He knew, she knew, he had a crush on her. Aimon had openly teased Mikkel enough times about it within earshot of Tam in the past.

Sighing, Mikkel said, "I was looking at your hair. I've never seen you braid all of it like that before."

Tam nodded. "Keeps it out of my face with the windows down. You got map duty, Mikkel. How far out are we?"

Mikkel did his best to not lose the map out the open window as it fluttered about from the gusts of wind. He studied the map then said, "Cool. We are about 120 miles out. We should arrive in New San Antonio in about 25 to 30 minutes."

Tammatha was quiet for a few minutes then said, "I'm glad you came with us, Mikkel."

She was looking away from Mikkel as she said it. He wasn't sure she had actually said it and was about to ask her to speak up when his vision went blurry for a moment and his head felt like it had cracked open.

"Ouch! Oh damn," Mikkel said as he grabbed his head with both of his hands, letting the forgotten map fly out the window.

Aimon radioed, "Hey, was that our map?"

Mikkel groaned as the initial pain subsided and he felt something different.

Tam hit the brakes to the ATV, skidding to a stop and sending plumes of dust rocketing upwards around the vehicle.

Both of her right hands held onto his left arm as she asked, "What? What's wrong?"

Three rounds from the top-mounted rail gun burst out into the distance.

Aimon radioed, "Um, my bad. I thought we were under attack. What's going on!"

Keeping one right hand on Mikkel's left arm, she used her other right hand to radio Aimon, "Shut it. Just a second and stop shooting at ghosts!"

Tam squeezed Mikkel's arm, asking, "You okay?"

Mikkel nodded, still holding his head in his hands, "I am. It's... Well, I don't know. It's like I feel something."

Tammatha frowned, "Feel what, Mikkel?"

Cracking his teary eyes open a little, Mikkel said, "Energy."

The right front passenger door opened and Aimon looked in, "Guys?"

Looking from Tam to Mikkel, Aimon groaned, "Oh man! Did you just break Mikkel's heart, Tam?"

Tammatha glared at Aimon and growled, "No, you dolt. I said shut it."

Aimon looked at Mikkel and said, "Why is he crying then? Can you guys fill me in if it's not about... emotional stuff?"

Mikkel shook his head and said, "Help me out, A."

After Aimon helped them both get down from the forward crew area, the three of them moved into the shade of the ATV.

Mikkel rubbed his eyes clean and said, "I still feel it. It just sorta hangs there, the feeling of energy, from further ahead of us. I can tell exactly how far away it is and know that it moves across the land in a north-south direction. I also know it's a Ley Line."

Aimon frowned. "You ever been close to a line before?"

"No," replied Mikkel. "First time I've been this close to one."

Tam asked, "Does it hurt? The feeling?"

Mikkel said, "No. I was more surprised than actually in pain. I can just... sense it. It's not exactly the most direct path to New San Antonio, but can we please drive to it?"

Aimon shrugged.

Tammatha said, "Of course, Mikkel. Let's go, guys. But Mikkel, if it starts to hurt, say something."

After about 15 minutes of driving across dirt and shrubs, the ATV cutting a path across the land, they arrived at the half mile tall Ley Line. Streaking across the landscape like a twisty, winding, bluish-white, crackling snake, the Ley Line blotted out the horizon as they approached it.

"Awesome," Aimon stated over the radio.

Tammatha said, "I've seen lines before but yes, it is awesome. Every time. How you doing, Mikkel?"

Standing about twenty feet away from the awesome Ley Line, the midday sun beating down on him, Mikkel was unsure how to explain to his friends what he felt.

"Feel it. Feel free. Hang on. I'll be right back," Mikkel said.

Stepping into the stream of the Ley Line, Mikkel heard Aimon saying, "Where..."

Tam and Aimon both cried out in alarm as Mikkel disappeared.

Aimon ran into the blue and white energy and looked around. Moving back out to stand next to Tam, he said, "You know what this means, right?"

Tam quietly said, "Mikkel is a mage. Specifically, he's a Ley Line Walker. I had no idea. I figured him to be... you know. Not a mage. A merc of some kind, someday. But not a Line Walker."

Aimon suddenly laughed. Slapping his hand on his knee, he bent over in fits of laughter.

"Care to let me in on the joke, A?" Tam said.

Aimon turned around and looked at Tam. In a serious voice, he said, "Mikkel is going to hate it when we tell him. He's going to have to learn to read if he's a mage."

Tam chuckled, "I tried teaching him. He kinda can. Badly. I don't think he was taking lessons from me to actually learn to read, if you know what I mean."

Aimon snickered, "I know. Our mage buddy has a crush on you. What about you, Tam? You like Mikkel that way?"

Tam turned towards the Ley Line and said, "Think he's okay? It's been over ten minutes now."

Aimon was about to repeat his question when Mikkel stepped out of thin air and suddenly appeared. Both Tam and Aimon rushed closer to Mikkel, asking him if he was alright.

Mikkel stood before his friends, the look of his eyes a little harder than it had been before. The black Bushman Trooper armor wet and crisscrossed with three burn marks on the chest plate. The NG-45 LP hanging down to his side in his right hand smoked. Absently he reloaded the pistol with a full clip, dropping the empty magazine into his pack.

"Mikkel?" asked Tammatha.

Holstering the energy pistol, he looked at her, running his free hand through his wet black hair. He said, "Radek. I've been going by Radek. I'd like it if you called me Radek, guys. Okay?"

Tam and Aimon exchanged looks with each other and both nodded.

"Before you ask. Don't ask. Give me time to process, okay? Let's get back on track for New San Antonio. It was a long trip and I don't think I ever want to return to Easter Island or the other place. I'm hungry for something other than grubs. Can I get some of our rations? Let's go. I'll explain later," Radek said.

As Radek moved back to the ATV, Tam noticed a new, but healed scar on his neck. Once they were rolling again she asked, "What happened to your neck? You okay?"

Radek looked at her, "Claw marks. Not a big deal. How long was I gone?"

Tam glanced sideways at him, "Damn Mikkel, Radek, you sound different. You were only gone for about 15 minutes."

Nodding, Radek finally cracked a smile, and his serious demeanor lifted a little as he said, "Well then, I should tell you Happy Birthday."

Tam smiled, "You said that this morning, but thank you."

Radek nodded, "I still need time to process. But... I was gone, three weeks about, I figure. Briefly on an island where the line leads to. Then I ended up at this other place. It was... ugh, Unholy. I'll tell you later."

Tam looked concerned and said, "I'll give you as much time as you need. Can I ask you one thing, though?"

Radek tried to act calm and softly said, "Yes, Tam?"

"Why the name change? Why Radek?"

Morning, September 14th, 107 P.A.

New San Antonio, Texas, Rifts Earth.

Radek finished loading the mixed plasma and tracer rounds into the rail gun. It was not as exciting a day as he had hoped for. His thoughts drifted back to home, his parents and his friends, Tam and Aimon.

Thinking about the day they went to New San Antonio, he smiled.

From across the way, sitting atop an identical hover tank, another new recruit just like him, named Tarja, called out to Radek, "Glad you are enjoying this. It's boring the hell out of me."

Radek laughed, "I was daydreaming. Trust me Tarja, this is boring. When I joined Warlord Don Marco's mercenary outfit, I wasn't thinking about all the maintenance and other un-glorified stuff that comes with our paycheck like weapon cleaning. You almost done? I'm finishing up now."

Tarja looked over the weapon she had been assigned to strip, clean and reload, "Bout five more minutes I'd guess."

Radek nodded, "When we finish, I say we get breakfast before someone else assigns us more crap work to do."

Tarja nodded and went back to her work. As Radek finished, he found himself thinking about his last night at home with Tygin and Tissa.

Tissa had done most of the talking. Tygin was too sad to see that the inevitable day had finally come when his adopted son was ready to leave home.

Tissa explained that his biological parents had indeed traveled from Europe, across Atlantis where they rescued Tissa and Tygin, and onto Texas. She explained that both his parents were what was referred to as True Atlanteans.

Tissa explained that most young Atlantean children received their marks of heritage at the age of five or six. The marks came in the form of two distinct magical tattoos. Tissa explained that the innate ability to sense Ley Lines and Ley Line Phase were part of being descendants of a True Atlantean. Probably along with other abilities which she was unfamiliar with.

Tygin had expressed his sorrow that Radek was only just four when his parents died and he and Tissa knew no way of finding other True Atlanteans to give Radek over to so he could be taken into his family's clan.

Radek had laughed softly, saying that he would never trade his childhood with Tygin and Tissa for some stupid tattoos.

After an emotional night of farewells at home, his parents had finally gone off to bed. Radek had gone out for a long walk. Nearing midnight, thinking about how much he was

going to miss his best friend, Aimon, Radek found himself walking past Bobby's Garage. He stopped across the street and looked up at the cloudy night sky.

"Are you having second thoughts?"

Radek nearly jumped out of his skin at the voice. Looking back down, he saw Tammatha was standing within the partially open front door of the room attached adjacent to the garage where she had her residence. It was the room he had hoped one day to rent back when he was working for Bobby.

Radek smiled broadly at Tam. Walking across the street to stand around ten feet away from her, he said, "Just thinking. I desperately want out on my own but I'm definitely going to miss this cruddy town, or rather some parts of this town."

Tam laughed. "Parts? What are you looking at, Mr. Mikkel Radek?"

Radek stepped back a pace and eyed her from head to toe before looking her in the eyes, "I'm looking at a devious young Rahu seductress, I think. Do you always say hello to fellows walking by your place while wearing such a provocative outfit? Lace and all. Naughty."

Tammatha grinned. "No, I don't. When I saw you standing out here, I quickly changed out of my flannel night pants and grease-stained shirt and put this on."

Radek had assumed they were play-bantering up until then.

Radek stammered, "Are you..."

Tam nodded.

Radek heard Tarja loudly saying, "Hey, bonehead, are you listening to me?"

Radek turned to look at Tarja. "Gah. Sorry, like I said, daydreaming. Done? Cool. Let's go get food."

As they made their way towards the mess hall, Tarja talked about life back home in a place called Markeen. Telling him about every aspect of the place, from the Baron named Cromwell to the time she helped defend the place from a Xiticix attack.

Listening to her, Radek reflected that he really wanted to see as much of the world as he could.

After breakfast, Sgt. Hydra, a uniquely bizarre Crazy, had called for them to go along with his squad on a patrol. It was both Tarja's and Radek's first time geared up in official gear and the excitement of the remainder of the day helped Radek not think about anything except the mission.

Afternoon, November 26th, 107 P.A.

New San Antonio, Texas, Rifts Earth.

Radek cinched the last strap tight on his black, Bushman Trooper armor. Grabbing his helmet, he put it on and clicked the fasteners closed. Testing his O2 reserves, cool fresh air pumped through the fully environmental body armor. Satisfied the armor was working as intended, he turned off the internal air and opened the slots in the helmet to allow him to breathe outside air.

Checking his clip, which was inserted into his NG-45 LP, then tapping his five reloads to make sure each magazine was in place, he picked up the NE-101 "Popper" Multi-Rifle. The large, tri-barrel rifle weighed 25 pounds and he grunted with

the effort of lifting it. The previous owner of the 101 had carried and fired the rifle one-handed. That had been the Crazy named Hydra.

Radek would have to carry it two-handed due to its weight, but he liked the firepower and kind of felt like he honored the memory of the now dead Crazy by carrying the rifle. Slinging the rifle across his back, he jumped up and down twice to get used to it laying across his back. Several magazines for the 101 were strapped to his left leg with Velcro.

With his pistol and rifle secured, he attached the leather sheath with the NE-RV04 Ripper Vibro-Sword in it to his waist combat belt.

Smiling after finishing, he looked up and saw Tarja grinning at him. She was dressed in dark urban camouflage, lighter and regular Bushman armor. No helmet like usual, her long, braided black hair hung down her back to her waist. With an energy pistol holster strapped to each side of her body, holding twin NG-57 ion pistols, she was also carrying a stolen C-27 plasma cannon.

He tilted his head to the side and said, "What?"

Tarja laughed, "You are a walking armory, you know. If the crap hits the fan, I am hiding behind you. Ready yet, slow-poke?"

Radek nodded, "Always. Let's find Captain Tad and get this show on the road, Corporal Tarja."

Tarja pretended to swoon and then saluted Radek, sarcastically saying, "Oh yes, Sergeant Radek. Let's. I still think it's hilarious that when you took Hydra's Sergeant pins and self-promoted yourself, no one said a thing except congrats on your promotion. You're incredible, Radek."

"I know. So are you. That's why I promoted you," Radek stated.

"Modest, too. Geez man," Tarja shook her head. "Let's do this thing."

Walking towards where Captain Tad had the troop transport stationed, Tarja spoke again about her home town of Markeen.

"You should come with me, Radek. A few more months of this and I'll have saved up enough credits to buy some land outside the Barony and maybe raise some whelps." Tarja said.

Radek grinned behind his helmet and evenly said, "Ask me again when you decide to go."

Captain Tad, a Wolfen Juicer barked, "Lock it up! Lock and load. Let's head out! Warlord Don Marco wants us to hit a CS transport not too far from here. There should only be about twenty soldiers comprised of humans and a few Dog Boys. We hit them hard and steal whatever they're transporting. Right! Let's go."

The troop transport was a previously stolen CS Mark V APC repainted with Don Marco's colors. Tarja and Radek followed other mercenaries into the rear of the APC. Settling in for the ride, Radek heard Tommy, a red-skinned, devilish looking D-Bee Mystic, talking about their escort.

Tommy spoke to one of the new guys who had fresh, unscathed armor, "Don't worry lad, this will be easy. We got two great pilots running our escort."

The new guy, wearing what looked like a brand new lighter version of Radek's armor, nodded behind his helmet. Radek

smiled at the freshly painted flames on the otherwise black armor.

In addition to the sixteen mercenaries loaded into the rear of the Mark V, a Glitter Boy power armor unit and an Ulti-Max power armor were going with them on the assault.

Radek whistled, "Damn. We got some serious firepower this trip. Kinda makes you wonder why."

Tommy looked at Radek and scoffed, "Does it? What do you know? We are going to shred those Dead-Head jackasses and be back in NSA for drinks!"

Radek just nodded and went back to minding his own business. Tommy turned back to the new guy and said, "Don't listen to Sergeant Radek. We're gonna kick butt. But what was your name again in case I need to make you a tombstone, greenie?" Tommy laughed.

The new guy leaned out to shake Radek's hand, saying, "My name's Indra, Sergeant. Nice to meet you."

Radek nodded and shook the guy's hand.

Tarja leaned against Radek and patted his leg with her hand. Radek thought to himself that things were really heating up between him and Tarja. He laughed to himself at the thought. Tarja was a Burster and he did consider her hot. Her happy and positive demeanor did make him happy to be around her. Now she was not so subtly talking about whelps. He was going to have to seriously give the topic of leaving New San Antonio some thought.

After Captain Tad announced that they had a five minute ETA until contact, everyone stopped having personal conversations and for a diverse band of hired mercenaries, they all acted quite professional as they prepared to conduct the assault.

Tobias Lin, their head communications guy, stood up as they were still rolling hot across the landscape towards the CS convoy. He nearly fell down from the bumpy and crazy approach the driver of the Mark V was taking towards the CS.

Tobias yelled, "Holy Tarn! The Ulti-Max just bit it. Destroyed completely, says Sadder."

The others murmured unhappily and Radek felt heat raising off of Tarja's body. Sadder was their Glitter Boy. Even from several feet away from Tobias, Radek could hear Sadder yelling across the communications channel and Tobias held his headset away from his ears.

The Mark V skidded to a sudden stop, sending Tobias flying into several mercenaries near him. The door from the front area to the troop compartment flung open and Tad raced past them all with blinding speed. It almost looked like he teleported to the back hatch, he moved so fast. Tad barked at them all as he opened the rear hatch, "Out! Take out the Spider Walkers first! Go, go, go! Apparently, the Coalition was ready for us."

Tad bolted out of the rear of the Mark V and was obliterated by a succession of blasts. The crater left was accompanied by flying sand, dirt and rocks. The Mark V jolted violently and spun to its left several feet. The sixteen mercenaries fell about in the rear of the troop compartment. Radek picked himself up and saw Tarja erupt into flames. He knew it was a protective barrier she had willed into existence around herself.

Running with her, Radek and the Burster were the next two out of the Mark V. The new guy, Indra and Tommy hot on their heels. Running outside and around to the left side of the APC for cover, Radek tried to pick a target to attack. The problem was there were too many targets.

Radek saw Tarja was covering the mercenaries fleeing out the rear of the APC. A twenty foot tall wall of flame blocked the mercenaries from sight and worked to direct their path.

Using the flaming wall for cover, Radek wildly fired six mini plasma grenades outward, away from the Mark V, and yelled across the communications channel, "Get lined up behind the Mark V! Cover sectors as four squads. Stay tight."

As the last mercenary, Tobias, came running out of the rear of the APC, Radek pushed him towards the others. Following Tobias, Radek looked around the Mark V. Sadder was destroying a Spider Walker with the Boom Gun on his Glitter Boy. Quickly taking in enemy positions and counting targets, Radek moved back behind the Mark V just in time. Several blasts from a rail gun tore into the side of the APC.

Tarja maintained the wall of flames as cover and Radek could see the faint outline of a magically created barrier covering most of the opposite side of their position. Red-skinned Tommy was casting another spell as Radek pointed east.

The other mercenaries followed his finger. In the growing distance, there was a CS transport vehicle hightailing it away as the CS combat detachment stayed to fight. The transport vehicle was driving at its top speed away from them towards a Ley Line.

The new guy, Indra, said, "Looks like our target is escaping."

Radek said, "That is our target. Looking to hide on the other side of the Ley Line out of our sight."

Throwing up another faintly visible barrier for additional protection, Tommy looked at Radek, saying, "Are you stupid? We lost. We need a way out of here. The Mark V is too damaged to use. There are several Spider Walkers out there which Sadder might be able to destroy but man, those two SAMAS will whittle the Glitter Boy down. Sadder is as good as dead."

Tarja yelled, "So pick a target and start helping Sadder!" Several of mercenaries took up defensive firing positions and opened fire on the CS Spider Walkers.

Tommy and Tobias were still standing next to Radek. Tommy said, "We are just going to draw fire! We need to run while..."

Radek stepped closer to Tommy, then stepped back as Tommy stopped talking. Radek was pretty sure only Tobias could see Tommy and him right now.

Holding the blade of the Ripper sword against Tommy's throat, Radek said, "A flick of the wrist and I open you up. Look Tommy, stop being a coward. Chant out some more barriers for the guys to hide behind and stop babbling about us running away."

Tommy muttered, "Okay, man."

Returning the blade to its sheath, Radek motioned Tobias closer. Radek could hear boom after boom as Sadder fought valiantly against stronger, faster and a larger number of power armors. The NSA mercenaries were sending blasts down-

range at the CS while Tarja, still wrapped in flames, hurled bolts of fire at the CS.

Radek turned to face Tobias and thrust the heavy NE-101 rifle into the communication expert's hands. "Look, Tobias, I'm going to get that CS transport vehicle and come back to pick you all up. While I do that, use the rifle to cover our six and try using the radio to call NSA for reinforcements. Got it?"

Tobias nodded.

Tommy laughed, "Not even a Juicer could catch up to that transport. It's too far away now. You're no Juicer, how do you think you're going to catch up to it on foot?"

Radek said, "Shut it. Keep casting barriers."

As the APC shook from taking another hit from a heavy energy cannon, Tarja looked down at Radek, saying, "Tommy is right. How do you think you are going to catch up?"

Radek held the Ripper sword in his left hand, pulled the NG-45 LP out with his right hand, looked up at Tarja and said, "Trust. Be right back with our wheels."

Indra leaned back around the Mark V for cover, holding his energy pistol tight to his chest with the weapon pointed down. As several blasts struck the Mark V, Soto looked at Radek and yelled, "Want help?"

Radek shook his head, saying, "No. Hold this position. I got this."

The CS transport vehicle was nearly half a mile away and still approaching the Ley Line, moving adjacent to it. Radek ran as hard as he could from the Mark V straight towards the part of the Ley Line which snaked across the rocky ground nearest them.

Running the thousand or so feet from the APC to the Ley Line in heavy armor was exhausting. Radek's legs ached and his chest hurt, but he ran as fast as he could. As he neared the Ley Line, he looked off to his right towards the CS transport. Cresting a hill, the transport looked like it was about to cross through the crackling, bluish-white line. Radek sheathed his sword and holstered his pistol as he continued running and neared the line.

Twenty feet away from the Ley Line, Radek disappeared.

Both Tarja and Tommy said, "What the hell?"

Trusting Radek, Tarja went back to flinging blasts of flame at the CS.

Not trusting Radek, Tommy decided they were all going to die and he cast protective magical barriers around the Mark V and the mercenaries as fast as he could.

Appearing within the Ley Line, directly over the CS transport, Radek dropped down on top of the vehicle. He held onto the small, top-mounted rail gun's barrel, and looked into the helmeted CS soldier's face that was about two feet away from him.

Radek nodded at the rail gunner and said, "Hey. What's up?"

The CS trooper balked, then seeing that Radek was too close for the trooper to use the rail gun on, he reached for a C-18 laser pistol in his chest holster.

Radek pounced on the CS soldier and used his left hand to hold the soldier's handgun pinned to his chest. Using his

weight, Radek held the gun away from him as the CS soldier struggled to point it at him. Wrapping a leg around the rail gun barrel for stability, Radek pulled his NG-45LP pistol out and shot the CS trooper five times in the head.

Radek lifted the dead trooper's body up and out of the gunner's pod. Climbing into the pod, Radek thrust his pistol downward and climbed the rungs down into the APC.

Working his way from the rear of the CS transport towards the driver's compartment, Radek only ran into two CS soldiers. Neither had expected to be attacked from within the vehicle. He dispatched both soldiers quietly with the Ripper sword since neither had a helmet on.

As Radek stood outside of the driver's compartment, he looked at the cargo and whistled. If Tarja wasn't back at the Mark V he would seriously be tempted to just kill the driver and drive away by himself.

There was only one thing to do. Taking the transport and driving back to pick up the others, Radek tried to figure out a way to help Sadder. If it weren't for the Glitter Boy pilot, the rest of them would have taken the full heat of the attack.

Rolling through the Ley Line at the closest point to the Mark V, Radek barely stopped as the remaining seven mercenaries clambered aboard, and hightailed it away from the CS and the Glitter Boy they were destroying.

Taking the long way back to NSA, Radek used his throat mic and told Tarja to keep everyone up top and outside of the transport vehicle.

As they got closer to New San Antonio, Radek used his throat mic and told Tarja to send Tobias and the new guy, Indra, down the gunner's pod and come with the radio.

Tarja copied and told Radek the new guy was missing. No idea where he went. She asked if everything was alright in the APC.

Radek replied, "Yes. I know what you would tell me and I want to ask Tobias his opinion on a question I have about the cargo. Trust me."

Tarja thought about the Ley Line Phase Radek had done, and considered how he, as a non-mage, could have done it.

She hoped whatever they had stolen from the CS was going to result in a big payoff. As Tobias climbed down the rungs into the transport, Tarja thought about which property she wanted near Markeen.

Morning, June 23rd, 108 P.A.

Kingsdale, Rifts Earth.

Radek parked the modified, light armored truck on the recently paved roadway in front of the Cyber Clinic in Kingsdale and yawned. It had been a long drive. Looking out the driver side window of the old-world F250, he admired the roadway. Seeing fresh-paved roads made him think about what it must have been like to drive on new and clean roads back before the fall. He reflected that his old friend Aimon had once claimed Earth was 90% paved hundreds of years ago. Smiling, Radek thought, for a non-human, Aimon had always been fascinated by the Golden Age of Man.

A lot had changed from his first weeks working for Warlord Don Marco. Two key factors had convinced him that it was time to move on. He'd earned enough credits from his pay and spoils of several combat encounters to afford to pay outright for basic Juicer conversion. Radek had no desire to get locked into a two year contract with some mercenary company or town to pay for the conversion. He would buy the conversion out right and not have to worry about being tied down to one place or group.

He was ready to travel.

The second reason he was moving on from Texas was Tarja. His best friend and more, she had died in a meaningless battle against the Coalition. General Kashbrook had dealt a serious blow to Warlord Don Marco last month. CS troops smashed into Marco's warriors all over the Free-lands. Tarja had told Radek she was out. After their big score on the CS a few months ago, she had enough credits to set herself up well. This was her last battle and she was going back to the Barony of Markeen. She had asked him to go with her.

Radek had said he'd think about it. At the end of the day, it really had been Tarja's last battle. As Radek gathered her up and buried her, he decided he would head towards Markeen. If for no other reason than to let her family know.

The F250 truck had a large cargo container bolted into the rear and the contents of that container made the back of the truck dip downwards, making the front lift upwards. He was obviously carting something heavy in the truck. Luck was on his side that the two places he wanted to visit in Kingsdale were on the same street. Looking across the paved roadway, he could see the First Rangers Bank. Upon arriving in Kingsdale he had secured lodging at The Happy Days Inn and then driven here. The FRB would be his next stop.

After the NSA mercenaries had taken out a CS convoy (well, arguably the NSA had been mostly taken out by the CS), he and the remaining mercs had made their escape in a CS transport vehicle. The transport vehicle had been loaded to the bursting point with bricks of gold. On their way back to Warlord Don Marco, a portion of those bricks of gold had disappeared. Of the four NSA mercs who had been in on the pilfering of the gold, only he was still alive.

Several hours later, after visiting the bank, he had deposited the gold and had it converted into credits. Taking a portion of the credits out on a credit stick, he left the rest in the bank.

Now, one year to the day after leaving his home town of Laredo, he was in Kingsdale. He planned on continuing towards Markeen, but not until he was done visiting the Cyber Clinic. Browsing the pictures tacked to the wall depicting the available options available for both Cybernetic and Bionic enhancement, he stopped to study the picture of a Juicer. The Juicer conversion was something he had been thinking of getting at some point, and the only reason he hadn't yet was the idea of starting a life with Tarja. There was nothing holding him back now.

The receptionist noticed he was inspecting the poster of a Juicer and stepped up next to Radek, "Not the cheapest thing to get, but other than going for M.O.M. implants or going Full Conversion 'Borg, you're looking at the most powerful thing on our menu. That is, unless you want to be a real god and go Mega-Juicer."

Radek handed her his credit stick, saying, "Regular Juicer."

The young lady smiled and said, "We can definitely make you an appointment, Sir."

Radek faced her and said, "Today."

Just after Midnight, Late 110 P.A.

Outside the Barony of Markeen

(After the Opening Events from Reaper Cell Redux, Part Two), Rifts Earth.

Radek looked back at the clearing.

He, Sara and Baron Cromwell were walking back towards the Baron's keep.

Sara, a Mystic, quietly said, "You alright, Radek? You seem like you are somewhere else."

Nodding, Radek said, "I'm fine. Just thinking. It's probably time for me to move on."

Sara smiled, "You know I had a vision last night. I didn't want to mention it, in the hopes I had interpreted it wrongly. I saw a Juicer – you, Radek – leaving Markeen. You ran away and went somewhere really far away. Somewhere frightening and unearthly. You were with a new group of warriors on some mission."

Radek looked over at her and smiled back, "I need to go. I only came here because of your sister, Tarja. I'll miss our friendship, but nothing says I can't visit again, right?"

Sara was quiet for a long time. Finally, she said, "I don't think you'll ever be back, Mikkel Radek. Whether that's because something happens to you or just because you don't come back, I don't know. I just feel that this is the last time I'll see you. Hell, for all I know, it's me that disappears and that's why I never see you again."

Radek frowned, "I hope not. But if it is, I wish you a happy and long life, Sara." Reaching out, he held her hand.

Sara glanced at Radek. "The only other feeling I have is, and no I don't know what it means, the man who has the silver sword and is surrounded by skulls and death is the first of two great men you will work with."

Following the Baron down into Markeen, they walked in silence the rest of the way.

Chapter One

Late December, 110 P.A.

The large white wolf ran swiftly across the land. He stopped and stood up on his hind legs. Over six feet tall and stark white, the wolf was genetically designed by the Coalition States military in Lone Star. As a Dog Boy, he had been

known as Ares, now he was more and less than he had once been. Humanoid and inhuman.

Sniffing at the air he could smell his prey. Dressed in broken armor and hungry, the wolf growled. He did not breathe and had been slain many months ago by a Demon Lord's minions. Now risen from the dead, he watched as an albino man, his former friend Damien caught up with him. His former friend was once a CS Psi-Stalker who had been slain by the same Demon Lord's minions.

The former Psi-Stalker hunched down on all fours and growled in reply to Ares. Both creatures, once alive and protectors of humanity, cared for nothing now except catching their prey, as their new master had ordered.

They hungered for the energy which saturated the Earth, allowing magic casters to perform spells or mages to summon creatures to do their bidding. The energy leaked from all living creatures and flowed in force through Ley Lines and at nexus points. Of these kinds of energy, only the taste of energy from living souls could abide their needs. As risen energy vampires they hunted the unsuspecting people on Earth, seeking those who held vast amounts of the energy within them.

Damien was mostly feral now, Ares knew his once friend was no more than of average animal intelligence now. It saddened him. He wasn't exactly sure why. Maybe because it meant he had no one to talk to. Ares could faintly recall that he, himself, had once been very intelligent. No longer though. He had trouble forming words and recalling their meanings. He knew this was due to the process that the master had used to resurrect him.

Ares thought about the master. Fear shrouded his mind. He tried thinking about the master's second. A tall Lizard Man named Rory. Rory still breathed but was completely loyal to the master now.

Such thoughts were beyond what he should have been capable of. Ares replayed the meeting between the master and Rory just before the portal had been opened and he and Damien sent after their prey. The master had spoken of a process called *the Cold-Blooded conversion*. The master had explained to Rory that since he had performed it on the already dead, Ares and Damien had held onto less of their former selves. Ares felt he should be upset by this but couldn't formulate why. His thoughts were interrupted by Damien growling again.

Ares looked at Damien who was pushing a wood and metal sign over. Looking down at the ruined sign Ares read one of the three pointed arrows attached to the now overturned sign. It read: Nader's Farm. Somewhere in the dregs of his memory, this place seemed familiar. What he knew was he was hungry and their prey was farther to the northeast from here. They should be going that way he figured.

Damien pointed to the southwest and motioned for Ares to follow as he bounded off on all fours. Ares dropped back into all fours and could smell the vast living energy in the distance. Hunger made him forget his thoughts and he growled as he followed Damien.

Chapter Two

Late December, 110 P.A.

The Mountaineer ATV rolled through the deep snow. Its pilot, Tesla, slowly negotiated her way through the dense forest.

Fay was sitting in the co-pilot's seat next to her and said, "Tes, I know you don't want to leave the ATV out here but I still think we might have to. You built this bad ass machine from the ground up and built in all kinds of spells into it. Just activate the invisibility spell and lock her up. If we go on foot it might actually be faster."

Stopping the Techno-Wizard ATV she had labored over for months, Tesla sighed.

Putting the secondary brake, on Tes pushed a bid red button on the dashboard labeled "I."

A big, tall, black muscular man around 20 years old came up to stand behind the pilot compartment.

"Sup ladies?" asked Brad Spartan. "Did we run out of gas?"

The ATV would never run out of energy as long as they were traveling near a Ley Line like they were.

Tes laughed, "You know Big Bessie runs on electric or Ley Line, and no we didn't run out of gas, Brad. Fay thinks we should continue on foot since I'm having trouble getting around all these trees."

Brad nodded, his long locks of dreads bouncing, "Okay. You're the pilot. I trust your judgement. Fay's the psychic so if she thinks she sees a better route on foot, cool."

He was teasing; Fay wasn't able to see in that way. Her psychic powers were over fire. As a Burster, she could burn things, people or creatures.

Fay rolled her eyes at the Bounty Hunter named Brad, "You scared of the snow, buddy? Being that we picked you up in Northern Gun last month, but you hail from New Mexico, I imagine this is way more frigid than you are used to."

Brad pretended to shiver, "Yea, I might need you two to keep we warm. Brrrr."

Tes stood up and smiling, she pushed her way past Brad towards the cargo area of the ATV, "Keep your paws off my sister buddy, she is way too hot for you."

Fay and Brad followed Tesla down into the cargo area where Tes stood looking at the big map she and Fay had painted on the wall.

Pointing to a portion of land way northeast of Northern Gun, Tes said, "We are around here, I guess."

Brad dropped down into his cot and finished assembling his NE-101 energy rifle. Looking up at the two women he had recently joined, he said, "Give me five to finish and get into my armor, okay?"

Tes nodded, "No hurry. I've got Big Bessie invisible right now. I think our tracks will likely be covered soon with that snowfall. Fay and I need to get our armor on too. I'm glad you joined us, Brad. Your extra firepower will be useful. Whatever tore through that small town and killed all those people has to be nasty."

Fay was dressing in light Huntsman body armor, augmented with a few extra spells built into it by Tes. Next she grabbed her cold-weather cloak.

Brad shrugged, "Like I said. Tracks looked like it was two people or monsters. Monsters I would guess by the damage done to those poor people."

Tes sighed, "It's sad. This world we live in. I miss Lazlo so much sometimes. Of course we will track these monsters down. Then I need to get back to locating that silo I'm looking for."

Stepping out into the bright sunlight from the ATV, Tes put her helmet on, looking around at the area through a polarized face plate. Her Techno-Wizard modified NG-EX10 Gladius Light Exo-Skeleton Battle Armor was painted white with black trim. Turning around, she called, "Looks clear."

Tes watched her sister and Brad step seemingly out of thin air from the invisible ATV down into the snow.

Fay wrapped her blue, hooded, fur-lined cloak tighter around her as she moved away from the ATV. Warming her hands together and squinting at the bright sun reflecting off the glistening white snow, she shivered, "Cold. Let's head out. The walking will keep us warm. It's really starting to come down."

Brad tied his dreads back behind his head and put on his sunglasses. For now, he decided to leave the helmet of his Coyote hybrid exoskeleton and power armor in the ATV. Brad had just bought the Coyote armor in Northern Gun before teaming up with the sisters. It was lacking the heavy armor plating of other power armors but still had all of the standard power armor systems. He liked the light weight and flexibility of movement combined with modest robotic speed and strength that it gave him. Carrying his NE-101 rifle he followed Fay.

Tes motioned for them to follow her. Setting off towards the west they walked between the trees and through snow as more fell from the sky. Roughly half an hour later, Tes held up one arm and waved the others to get down.

Fay settled into the snowbank next to Tes and Brad turned around to watch their backs.

"What is it?" asked Fay.

Tes nodded forward and whispered, "Running water ahead. Maybe a creek or river? I thought I heard something else. A voice."

Glancing back at Brad, Tes signaled him to stay put. Looking at her sister, Tes said, "Stay here sis. I'm serious. Stay. I'll be back."

Tes pushed several buttons she had built into the Gladius armor. The first button cast a Globe of Silence around her. The second activated her Ithan spell. Holding the Techno-Wizard rifle in her hands, she moved towards the top of the hill in front of her. Looking over the top of the rise she saw a bunch of trees partially blocking a small river lower down. Advancing down the hill Tes picked her steps carefully. She was trying to move as silently as possible, so it would do no good if she slipped and rolled down the hill.

At the bottom of the hill the ground leveled off and she looked across the water to the other bank. There was a small

campfire roasting food on a spit and a tent. The tent looked small, maybe for two people at most. Glancing around, she didn't see anyone, but still carefully hid behind several trees and patiently waited.

A few moments later, glad for the Globe of Silence surrounding her, Tee gasped in surprise. "Oh my," she thought as she saw a tall nude male stride boldly out of the tent and look around. The man had short, blond, spiky hair which his hands ran through as he looked about. It almost felt like he knew there was someone there. Keeping utterly still, Tes held her breath. Rigid muscles flexed as the man strode into the river. Shivering, he took a deep breath and plunged down under the water. Tes knew what he was and relaxed a little.

Eyeing him as he had walked down to the river, she noted two things about the man. One, he had a lot of scars. The second was his body was partially covered by Cyber-Armor. Not normal cybernetics or bionic augmentation, it was obviously Cyber-Knight armor, as it had grown and covered his body in the way only they were able to do.

Deciding to make her presence known to the blond haired Knight, she took advantage of the time he was under water to stand up and move to the edge of the river. After all, she mused, how often did one get the drop on a fabled Cyber-Knight.

Tes pictured the look on his face once he surfaced and saw she was standing there. She giggled happily and waited for him to come back up.

After a few long minutes she became worried. Had he run into trouble? Did something attack him under the water? She wondered if she should jump in and try to help him. Maybe the man was able to hold his breath well or even had an O2 lung. Stepping closer to the river, she tried using her helmet's thermal imaging to see if she could see him.

Suddenly, as she was leaning forward, a pair of hands thrust out pushing her forward. A silent scream erupted from her as she toppled forward into the river. Flailing about, Tes momentarily panicked until she realized how shallow the water was. Sitting up, water dripping down her face plate, she looked up at the biggest grin she had ever seen. The Cyber-Knight slapped his right knee and burst out laughing.

"Not funny," she yelled.

The Cyber-Knight put one hand to his ear and said, "What? Can't hear you. Silence spell?" He asked still chuckling.

Reaching up, Tes pushed a button on her armor. This time he would be able to hear her.

"Not funny, I said," Tess righted herself and sat up.

The Cyber-Knight shrugged, "It's funny from where I'm standing."

"Naked," remarked Tes.

"Well, you did interrupt my bath."

"Need help out of the water?" He asked and offered his hand.

Tes shook her head, no.

"I've got this. Thank you. Do you have a name, Knight?"

"I do," he said still grinning. "Why don't you invite your friends down while I swim back over and dress? Unless you plan on sitting there in the drink all day ogling me."

"I wasn't ..." Tes blushed and looked down. Hearing him step down into the river, Tes looked up and watched him run out into the shallow water then plunge into the deeper portion. Standing up she radioed Brad.

"Come on down. I met a Cyber-Knight. I'll be at his camp."

"Is he alone?" Asked Brad over the radio.

"I think so, yes."

Chapter Three

"Who are you?" Asked the Coalition soldier as he looked at the pile of dead bodies all around one man. The corpses were several different types of slain Lesser Demons cattered about, cut up, burned and shot full of holes. Turning his gaze back to the mercenary, he eyed the C-20 energy pistol and silver sword the man held down to his sides.

"I'm RC. You?" Answered the mercenary. The man was wearing old style, jet black Dead Boy armor from the waist down. His mid-section was wrapped in bandages, bruises still visible. With no shirt on the man was wearing an old, ratty military field jacket.

"Major René Soren, Iron Heart Special Forces Team Seven," the soldier said.

"Okay, well nice to meet you René. We are pretty far from the City of Iron. What brings you and your four hidden troopers out here?" inquired RC.

René looked the man in his dark grey eyes and chuckled, "Orders." His SF team was indeed hidden in the trees and ready to open fire on the lone Merc if need be.

RC holstered the C-20 and pointed his free hand at René's own weapons.

"What are you carrying, René? I've never seen those types of weapons before."

René grinned behind his SF helmet and replied, "Sorry RC, top secret. You didn't kill all these demons by yourself. I can see multiple attack points and tracks. Where's the rest of your group?"

RC turned to survey the carnage, "I'll show you mine, if you and yours can hold your fire. We aren't your enemy, René. Some of my guys aren't human, and they were worried that you might shoot first and chit chat later."

René nodded, understanding the concern. His team wasn't out hunting Mercs or D-Bees, he had bigger fish to fry, "Listen RC, I'm going to have my team converge on my six. Tell your guys to come on out. I have no interest in fighting you. Maybe just some simple exchange of information. We are tracking some major demons. Deal?"

RC nodded and said, "Agreed." Lifting his free hand up, he held up four fingers.

As René watched the man, he reflected on how RC had the air about him of being a former CS soldier.

A field of invisibility flickered off and René saw five others standing about sixty feet away. Three were humans, two men and a woman. One man was a Juicer. The other two were definitely not human. René recognized the one as a male Simvan

Monster Rider. The other was a squat, blue D-Bee dressed like a Line Walker.

René radioed his SF team and advised them to come forward. The four CS Special Forces members slowly stood up and converged in strategic positions behind René.

Major Soren's team consisted of Tanner, a Psi-Stalker and Moore and Miller; all three were veteran CS SF Sergeants. The last member of his team was the young SF Lieutenant named Douglas.

RC introduced his team members as, Soto, Melissa, Radek the Juicer, Grelic the Simvan and Jimboy the Line Walker.

René simply replied, "We are Special Forces team IH7."

RC had a faraway look in his eyes for a moment and then nodded, "Okay, well great to meet you IH7. So yeah, we were in the area, hunting down this group of demons who recently attacked one of your CS outposts. They splintered off from a larger force. Probably the ones you are looking for. The other force is being led by a Blood Mage and a Bal-Rog demon. That sound like your target?"

René nodded, "It does. They assaulted Fort Whitefish Falls last night. Our intelligence branch thinks that they are headed to meet up with a larger force of demons in the area. Why are you hunting a group of demons who attacked a CS fort?"

RC smiled, "We have to work together, right? Didn't Emperor Prosek say he was calling on all people to fight these demons from Hell? I've heard reports of CS soldiers running operations north of New Lazlo, effectively protecting New Lazlo from these demons. So why not return the favor, right Major?"

René removed his helmet and noticed the reaction the woman had to seeing his scarred face. Attaching his helmet to his belt, he returned his gaze to RC, "Are you from New Lazlo, RC?"

RC laughed and said, "No. But we do have a common enemy, Major. Look, we planned on taking the fight to this other group of demons. But if you are of a mind to just track them back to this larger force we could assist you."

Lieutenant Douglas stepped closer to his Major and said, "Sir? They might give away our presence. We are better off as a small quiet team, don't you think?"

René pointed at the carnage and said, "Maybe. But the added firepower might be handy if we come under fire." Looking at RC, René continued, "Have you seen the other group?"

RC nodded a yes, "They're roughly three miles northwest of here. We saw them. About twenty strong. Two human Blood Mages and the rest demons."

René said, "Tanner."

Sgt. Tanner sprinted across the carnage of inhuman bodies and off to the northwest.

RC watched and said, "Radek."

The Juicer grunted and said, "OK," and ran off to join the Psi-Stalker.

René turned to face Douglas, "Have Moore and Miller get our ride."

Douglas replied, "Sir, yes Sir" and barked at Moore and Miller, "Get the J-2."

Moore and Miller ran south and disappeared into the woods.

RC grinned, "Seriously? You have a Naruni Juggernaut Hover Tank?"

René shrugged, "We do. We will set up camp here until your Juicer and Sergeant Tanner return. We have food and water if you want some. I also can have my medic look at your injuries if you want."

RC slid the silver sword into its sheath, at his hip, and nodded, "That's nice of you. Sure."

Once the Hover Tank was driven into the clearing, the CS soldiers set about setting up a table with dried foodstuffs and water.

Sitting on an uprooted tree, near the tank, RC spoke to René, "No but seriously Major. What kind of weapon it that? Both the pistol and rifle you are carrying are obviously of CS design but they aren't any kind I am... That I have seen before."

René kept his rifle lying across his lap as he ejected the magazine out of the holstered pistol. He handed the magazine to RC who took it. As RC inspected the rounds in the magazine, René said, "Depleted Uranium rounds. The pistol and rifle can interchange magazines and the rounds can vary. DU, wood, silver or iron tipped rounds. All but the wood are hollow point, enabling the bullet to open up after impact and shred the target. Like propellers, the bullets spin around inside your target, doing great damage. Unlike some demons that are immune to energy blasts these bullets hurt all demons."

RC whistled, "Damn. You SF boys get all the cool toys."

René shook his head, "Standard issue to all troops. We have some interesting bullet types but the guns are available throughout Iron Heart."

RC nodded and handed the magazine back to René who slid it home in the pistol.

"Tell me RC, do you always work with magic users?" René pointed at the squat, little, blue D-Bee who was eagerly finishing off the remainder of the CS foods.

RC smiled, "Jimboy was an unexpected addition to my group. But I tell you what, he's hella useful in a fight and he has a heart of gold. Good guy. Are there going to be any issues with your team being around him?"

René shook his head no. "On occasion we have worked alongside spell casters before. 'Course they weren't starving spell casters."

RC laughed, "He casts spells and he eats. A lot. Like I said though, heart of gold."

René finished the water in his canteen and stood up as Sgt. Tanner and the Juicer returned.

Tanner stood in front of René and reported, "The second group split up. Half are headed northeast in the general direction of Iron Heart. They looked all fired up about something. The other half are headed west with some human and D-Bee prisoners. Oddly enough, we also found some recent tracks of two beings trailing the second group. I'd say a humanoid and maybe a Dog Boy. Staying upwind and out of sight, but also following the prisoner group."

"Similar tracks to the ones we saw near our location a few nights ago, RC," explained Radek. "We thought they might be

tailing us, but now I'm not sure if it was us or the demons they were looking for."

RC stood up and motioned to the other man on his team named Soto. Soto rounded up the mercenaries and stood ready to head west.

RC nodded at Soto and turned to face René, "Thank you for the food and water. We will be headed west. I plan on killing those demons, freeing the prisoners and heading back to where I was originally headed to. I assume you will go north east and pound the other half?"

René nodded, "Yes. Mount up and get ready to roll, IH7!"

As the CS Special Forces members gathered their gear and entered the J-2 tank, René stopped, turned to face RC and said, "Good luck, RC. I won't be mentioning our encounter in my after-action report. Nothing of importance to report. Oh, and I was sorry to hear about the scientists from Science North. I am married and can't imagine the loss of my wife. My condolences to you, Major."

As René walked away and got into the tank, Ronan Cross watched him go. The tank moved northeast and was gone from sight in a few minutes.

"I liked him, hon. He struck me as a great warrior. Did you know him, Ronan? He apparently knew who you were." Herjaza, the rune silver sword, spoke in Cross's mind.

Shaking his head no Cross quietly said, "No. I don't know him. Just his kind. Dedicated Special Forces officer. Don't tell anyone I said it but he and his SF team are total bad asses. Typical Special Forces guys."

Turning to face Soto, Cross said, "Let's do this. Saving these people will appease our non-Coalition friends, but then we need to get back to Chi-Town and report in to Colonel Hunter, and see how things fared with the Xiticix that got into Chi-Town. Not sure yet how I plan on pulling that off without giving away that we are still CS to the others. If you think of something let me know. I'd really like to keep using these three on our team but it'll have to be unofficial."

Soto nodded, "That might not be too far-fetched. This whole Cell thing is unofficial. It'll come down to whether you want to let the other three in on the truth or not."

Cross nodded, "Let's go."

Chapter Four

Sitting around the small campfire Tes, Fay and Brad listened to the Cyber-Knight.

"Good to meet you. My name is Sir Lars Madden. Lars will do. I'm from Washington where I studied to be a Cyber-Knight. I've been out wandering and looking for a righteous quest." His big smile and handsome looks kept distracting Tes. At least he was dressed now, thought Tes, remembering his chiseled body.

Leaning towards her sister, she whispered, "Mine. Too old for you."

Fay giggled and Brad frowned at her. Turning to face the Cyber-Knight, now dressed in Heavy Cyber-Knight armor,

Brad smiled and said, "I'm Brad Spartan. From Texas but met these ladies in Northern Gun while shopping."

Fay spoke before her sister could, "We are hunting two evil monsters, Sir Madden, if you're looking for a worthy quest! I'm Fay and this is my sister, Tesla. When are you taking your next bath, Sir?"

Tes punched Fay in the arm. Looking at the Cyber-Knight, she said, "We are hunting monsters. We drove into a village a few miles back to find provisions and the whole place was tore up. Brad says it's two monsters, and I think we are close to finding them."

Lars nodded and said, "I, of course, would never turn down a worthy adventure. I will join you on this quest if you'll have me."

Fay jumped up and held out her hand to Lars, saying, "It's settled then. You're part of Fay's Fantastic Four! Welcome to the group, Sir."

Brad rolled his eyes. Tes scoffed, "If anyone is naming our group it's not you, Sis."

Lars laughed and said, "You mentioned a vehicle?"

"My Techno-Wizard ATV is hidden up the hill," said Tes. "But the woods are too dense so we set out on foot. I think we are within a mile or two of the monsters. We should head out."

Lars nodded, "Always ready."

Brad groaned but smiled, "Good. Let's go."

Fay nodded, saying, "Ready."

Tes stood up and grabbed her Techno-Wizard rifle. Pointing at Brad, he nodded and set off to find the trail with the others following him.

Chapter Five

Jimboy leaned over Grelic, looking at the Simvan's wounds. They had encountered the Blood Mages and minions of Hell an hour ago. The demons had been casually making their way across the snowy ground, obviously headed towards the larger group of demons a few miles away.

With two dozen human and D-Bee prisoners in tow, chained and being dragged along, the demons had fought to the last against the group with Jimboy to the bitter end. Glancing around, Jimboy looked sad. They had done a good thing. Song worthy. However, both Grel and Melissa were badly injured. Grel would die if he didn't receive professional magic healing soon. Melissa was better off but she had been sorely injured.

Both RC and Soto tended to Melissa and her injuries. Radek stood by Jimboy and kept an eye out for unseen danger.

Jimboy shook his weight about then spoke to the group, "I can open a portal to Lazlo and seek magical healing there for our two wounded."

Radek nodded.

Soto watched RC finish applying a bandage to Melissa and said, "With your permission, RC, I'll get Melissa to a Doctor."

RC sat back and smiled at Melissa, "You'll make it. Try not to move around too much. Good job."

Standing up, RC nodded at Soto, saying, "Just a sec."

Walking over to Grelic, RC leaned down to talk to the Simvan, "Thank you, Grelic. If the former prisoners hadn't run off I'm sure they'd thank you too."

Grelic grunted.

Looking up at Jimboy, RC asked the Blue Mage, "You can't heal them?"

Sadly, Jimboy shook his head, "My spells are geared towards combat not strong healing I'm afraid."

Radek interjected, "I'll say. What were those black ball things? They did some crazy damage to these demons."

Jimboy smiled, "The spell is called, Annihilate. I think our victory song will have to wait for now but be sure you all were brave and deserving to be sung about."

RC nodded, "Well you sure did annihilate these guys. You all did. Good job people. But now we need to get Grelic and Melissa help. Radek and I will track the other demons out here and recon what they are up to. Jimboy, you get Grelic to Lazlo. Soto, you get Melissa to a Doctor. Then we can regroup, okay?"

Jimboy nodded and cast a spell on Grelic who softly floated above the ground by about five feet. Resting on thin air and magically held afloat, the Simvan looked about with wide eyes.

Grumbling aloud the Simvan grunted, "Don't need songs. Grelic need healing."

Jimboy reached out and took ahold of Grelic to pull him through the air, "I will sing you our great song as I pull you towards the distant Ley Line. We will be in Lazlo soon enough."

RC nodded, turning back to Soto RC moved back to his side quietly saying, "You got this? We could all go."

Soto shook his head, "I'll call for a MedEvac on my radio after you and Radek head out. I'll get her to Chi-Town or Iron Heart, where ever, then we will return."

RC stood up and walked over to Radek to watch the Blue Mage pull Grelic along toward the distant Ley Line.

Radek turned to look at RC, "Now what? I mean obviously we loot what we can from these dead demons, but other than booze, I doubt we will find much of use to us."

RC shrugged with a faraway look on his face, "We take their booze to stay warm tonight and we head out that way to see what we can see. Until the others are back, we are lacking the firepower to tackle much more of these demons."

Radek nodded, "Okay RC."

Cross said, "I'm going to say bye to Jimboy and Grelic. Ready in a few." Cross made his way over to Grelic and Jimboy and Radek walked over to Soto and Melissa.

Glancing over at the Simvan, mage and his commander, Soto asked Radek, "You're OK?"

Radek squatted down next to Melissa to look at her injuries, "Oh, I'm fine. You hang in there Melissa," he said with a smile.

She nodded and grit her teeth.

"I'll get her taken care of." Said Soto. "You watch out for RC and yourself."

Tilting his head to the side, his long hair falling across part of his face, Soto asked Radek, "When did you become a Juicer?"

"About two years ago. Why?"

Soto shrugged, "I just wondered. I used to think you were a mage is all." Holding out his hand Soto said, "Nice to meet you Sergeant. My name is Indra."

Melissa looked confused and Radek stood up. Eyeing Soto, Radek nodded, "The way you hold your pistols between firing. It's unique. Stands out. Now I recognize you, Indra. You disappeared. Did you know what was on the CS transport we assaulted?"

Soto smiled, "It's called Position Sul. Used in close-quarters combat as a low ready. Some Special Forces units study old-world tactical videos and such when they can be found. I used to work on a CS SF team back before I started over a decade of long-range solo recon stuff. As far as New San Antonio, I bugged out instead of killing CS troops. But, no, I have no idea what was on that transport. Want to share?"

Radek shook Soto's hand. "Nice to meet you for real this time," said Radek. "When you come back I'll tell you what we recovered from that transport. Be safe."

Soto nodded.

Chapter Six

Ares and Damien stood in the center of the small town. More of a small group of bunkers built beneath an old bridge, the town had been home to several families who hunted the area and fished from the lake nearby. The town had held little in the way of resistance when Ares and Damien had run in from the woods.

Two men, now laying torn up on the ground nearby, had been dressed in modern armor with energy weapons. Their attempt at defending the town had been sorely lacking. The two risen had swept in and laid waste to the families and their protectors.

Drinking the energy out of the slain both, Ares and Damien had fed but were still hungry.

Ares pointed back towards the dense woods, sensing four humanoids approaching. One in particular radiated a strong essence of energy. Ares wanted to feed upon the four approaching. Damien growled shaking his head, no.

Damien pointed the other way towards a stronger essence. Ares nodded. The stronger energy was farther away, but would provide a larger meal.

Making their way further away from the woods, they ran on all fours as the newcomers approached.

Stepping carefully out of the underbrush, Brad pointed towards the town under the long destroyed bridge. Tes, Fay and Lars followed Brad into the clearing.

Seeing the death and destruction below, Tes started to run after the hunched-over albino and large, white wolf man. Lars placed a hand on her shoulder and said, "Wait."

"Why? They're getting away," protested Tess.

"For now they are, but look where they are heading. There is a small Ley Line community that way. About a hundred souls live there. On foot, we won't be able to keep up with

those monsters. But if we go back for your ATV, I know a dirt road we can use to drive to the community and get there first.”

“I agree,” said Brad. “That would allow us to warn the people and fight alongside them.”

“Okay. Let’s hurry,” said Tes,

Chapter Seven

Soto walked with Melissa towards the briefing room. He still felt annoyed at being reassigned from Reaper Cell to Spectre Cell. Major Cross was going to wonder why he had never returned. After returning to Chi-Town with Melissa to have her injuries tended, he had assumed that they would be back out with Cross soon.

Colonel Douglas Hunter and Captain Lawrence Kief had visited Soto and Melissa two days ago and explained that they were being assigned to Kief’s team. Kief seemed like a good guy, and Melissa liked him. It just felt like he was leaving Cross out in the cold by not returning. Hunter had stated that a Special Forces team was going to make contact with Cross to issue him new orders.

Soto had mentioned that Cross was out there with no other CS operatives, just some mercenary types Cross had convinced to work with him.

“What’s he paying them with?” Inquired Kief.

Soto had laughed, “Pride. Honor. Good songs. Knowing they are helping those in need. Not credits.”

“Charismatic, huh?” said Kief.

Melissa smiled, “He just sorta says this is what we are doing and people follow him.”

Colonel Hunter commented, “Should have put him out there sooner. Undercover. When he was younger, but I’d never heard of him before Major Mosin pulled him out of the Commandos and into our branch of operations. Doesn’t matter anyway, Lyboc wants Cross here working Intel for us as a Lieutenant Colonel.”

Soto stayed quiet on that point but knew Cross wouldn’t be interested in being on a desk job. The man just wasn’t made that way. Besides, thought Soto, what would Cross do with his sword?

Soto decided that unless he was prepared to abandon the CS, Soto had no course but to do as ordered.

Melissa had said that Cross would be alright until the SF boys gave him his recall orders.

Later, Soto and Melissa turned the last corner in the maze of underground hallways deep under Chi-Town as they approached the door to their destination.

Soto held the door open to the briefing room for Melissa and followed her in. Finding seats, they sat down with some rough looking individuals.

Colonel Hunter watched from the back of the small briefing room as Captain Lawrence Kief stood at the podium before the five members of Spectre Cell. Kief had adapted well to the skin grafts and bionics he had needed after his heroic fight against the invading Xiticix which had infiltrated Chi-Town.

With a bionic left hand, under fake skin and a bionic right arm, not hidden by fake skin, Kief’s upper torso was protected by Cyber-Armor. In armored CS fatigues, the only portion of his new bionics visible was the bionic right hand. He looked good as new, a model CS officer thought Hunter.

Kief nodded at Colonel Hunter and launched into his mission briefing. The other members of Spectre Cell listened as Kief informed them of the CS Naval Defiance-Class Sub, the Ohio, which was attacked, earlier today, while traveling from Quebec harbor out towards the Pacific Ocean. Video records and the few survivors recounted that a group of pirates, like Dimensional Raiders, stole six long-range nuclear warheads from the Ohio before Rifting away.

Kief stated, “The good news is the Ohio is capable of carrying 336 such nuclear warheads and only six were taken. The bad news is just one warhead is capable of being fired from virtually anywhere on Earth and can hit Chi-Town. Our job is to return to the site of the theft and using a CS prisoner who is a Magic user, and under our control, open a portal and go to where the raiders went to.”

Hunter mused to himself, under our control. The mage would be posing as a CS prisoner but was, in fact, a pro-CS Vanguard Ley Line Rifter. The Rifter was named Ulric Stonewell and had secretly assisted hundreds of Disavowed on their missions.

Kief continued, “Each of you has your own reasons for being part of this mission. Most or all of you have never met before. As members of the newly formed Spectre Cell, I’ll go around the room and briefly introduce each of you. After this briefing you’ll have some time to get to know each other more while we hitch a ride on the Ohio.”

Pointing to each of them one by one, Kief said, “Soto is our Ranger and infiltrator, and the only one here who has any real time on a Cell Team. Next to him is Melissa, our Tech Officer, and all around mechanic. Our Jack Russell Terrier ‘Dog Boy’ goes by Jack. Owen is a former NetSet Burster and an EOD expert familiar with the nuclear missiles we are tracking down. Last, we have John Grainger, the last surviving member of the Nautical Commando teams that were on the Ohio when it was attacked. The NCs, including John, are why the raiders only got six of the missiles.”

Owen asked, “Do we know who these raiders are?”

Kief nodded, “Intel suggests that they were possibly two groups working together. Some of the raiders were identified as past or present members of a pirate group called the Iron Heart Avengers. Several others were simply unknown, but believed to not previously have been associated with the IHA. Get your gear and meet me in 30 at room 116 and we’ll head out. Dismissed.”

Spectre Cell filed out of the room and Kief spoke to Colonel Hunter, “As long as this mage prisoner cooperates, we’ll get the warheads back, Sir.”

Colonel Hunter nodded, “Back or destroyed. Either way. Good luck, Captain.”

Kief saluted as Hunter left.

Chapter Eight

Colonel Thaddius Lyboc glared at Colonel Douglas Hunter. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Lyboc sighed.

“Look, I appreciate your point of view Doug, but I’m not changing my mind. Cross is a loose cannon. The only way we will keep him in line and under our control is here as an Intel Operative. I guarantee you he won’t do it. He won’t sit here and send others out on missions. He’s a loose end that needs to be dealt with. You already saved Master Sergeant Indra Soto and Petty Officer Melissa Hawken by assigning them to Spectre Cell. I can let that go.”

Colonel Hunter frowned, “You got time in grade on me, Lyboc, and the ear of Joseph, and I just want it noted that I think Major Cross could still be a valuable asset to the Wayfarer project. If you’re dead set on disposing of him, so be it. What do you have in mind?”

Colonel Lyboc nodded, “Based on Master Sergeant Soto’s report and cross referencing it to an Iron Heart Special Forces team’s logs there is an SF team in the vicinity of Major Cross. I am sending orders to a Major René Soren of IH7 SF to track down Cross and neutralize him. They’ll take care of it. Cross just knows too much.”

Hunter shrugged, “Okay. I’ll leave it in your hands. I understand the Iron Heart Special Forces teams are the best of our best SF teams so I’m sure they will do the job.”

“Doug,” said Colonel Lyboc as he tried to sound understanding. “The members of the Wayfarer project were all secretly hand-picked by Joseph Prosek II, every last one of them except for Major Cross. He’s a liability. I can see why the deceased Major Mosin picked Cross but he is a liability. Uncontrollable. You, yourself mentioned that you think the man is using an artifact or more likely, being used by some artifact which we don’t know more about. It’s the nature of how this project has to work. Once we use these men and woman, CS or otherwise, they have to be dealt with. This project must remain a secret.”

Hunter nodded at Lyboc.

Sighing, Lyboc turned to leave, “I’ll see you later, Doug. I’ll go handle this.”

After Lyboc left Colonel Hunter’s office, Hunter growled, “Damn it. Pompous.”

Stepping into the room from her secretary’s office adjacent to Hunter’s office, a young female Lieutenant saluted.

Hunter returned the salute and said, “Heather. I’m going to ask you to do something for me.”

Colonel Hunter continued telepathically communicating with the Lieutenant. As both the Colonel and Lieutenant were psychic and both able to communicate telepathically, the rest of the conversation was mind to mind.

Hunter projected the thought, “Something I don’t want you to ever talk about to anyone.”

“Yes Sir?” She responded telepathically.

Hunter sat quietly for several minutes then projected, “Get me a secure line to a General Harrison in Iron Heart.”

* * *

Major René Soren and his Special Forces team were concealed under thermal blankets, hidden under the snow. René had the team hide the J-2 hover tank in one of their usual locations and Lt. Douglas radioed for a pick-up. Low on ammunition and wearing damaged Special Forces armor, each member of the elite team had taken a beating from the larger Demon force they had hit and run. Smiling, René thought, no casualties on our side and we blitzed those Demons. Taking out nearly half of the Demon Force, IH7 bugged out and escaped.

Waiting for a CS Demon Locust helicopter to arrive and EVAC the SF team, they’d be home in a few hours. René was sure the others would hit a bar and party, he was looking forward to seeing his wife.

Lt. Douglas motioned silently to the others. The Locust was five out. René nodded at Douglas who then signaled for the SF team to pack it up. Right as the Locust was approaching, the team was ready to go.

Standing back in the trees, they waited for the helicopter to drop down and pick them up.

Instead, the Locust hovered.

“Great. We’re not done,” grumbled René,

Two boxes were lowered down on ropes. Running out to the boxes, the special ops troops cracked them open, reloaded their weapons and grabbed the gear inside the crates.

René watched the helicopter as a man in elite SF armor stepped out of the side door and used a jet pack to lower down to face René.

The man was wearing elite SF armor devoid of rank. Stepping closer to René, he motioned for Major Soren to follow him.

The rest of IH7 returned to the tree line and took up defensive positions.

The SF man walked with René to the far side of the tree line, away from the rest of the team. René realized who the man was noticing his limp.

Surprised, René started to become worried but remained outwardly calm.

Once in the trees and out of view, the soldier removed his face plate and René saw he had guessed right.

“General Harrison. This must be important.”

“Yes,” groaned the General. “A favor was called in to me. So here I am. Listen René, you are going to receive orders from Chi-Town. I have them here. I’ll give them to you in a moment. I am asking you a big favor. I am asking you to read the orders, after I leave, destroy them and then do what I ask of you instead. Then I need you to return to Iron Heart and report that you finished the orders as Chi-Town instructed.”

“Sir I am sure you have your reasons and you don’t need to explain them to me. You know I serve the CS always. In our line of work it goes, Special Forces, Iron Heart, the Coalition States. Go on.”

“I am familiar with the saying of, SF IH CS Oorah,” said the General. “I will make sure you are allowed to continue in the field and stay off a desk for at least another five years if that’s your desire still. Here’s the deal, Lt. Colonel Soren, congrats on a field promotion. And as the operative in charge

of IH7, I need you to locate a man named Major Ronan Saint Cross and convince him to play dead. Chi-Town wants him dead. My acquaintance, whom I owe a favor to, wants Cross to disappear, but not killed. Any mistakes in this and our careers are over. Do you understand?"

"I got it Sir. IH7 will get it done."

General Harrison smiled. "Not IH7 Lieutenant Colonel. You. I won't jeopardize my career due to a possible loose-lipped enlisted man. Not even SF enlisted. IH7 will standby here and wait for you to return. I'll have a Locust on standby when you finish. Dismissed and thank you."

René hid his anger. He wasn't angry at doing the mission solo. He'd done plenty of solo or two-man jobs. He was just angry the General had been blunt and didn't trust IH7. Shaking the offered hand of the General, René put on a smile and said, "See you soon, Sir."

General Harrison handed over a package to René and used his jet pack to return to the hovering Locust.

Once the helicopter was out of sight, the rest of IH7 made their way over to René.

"Sir?" asked Lt. Douglas.

"All I can tell you," said René, "is your orders are to standby here until I return. No tail on me, this is truly a solo op."

Frowning and grumbling, the rest of IH7 didn't like it but they set about digging in to wait.

As René reloaded his weapons and prepared to leave, Lt. Douglas quietly asked, "I know you said no tail. But..."

René held up a hand, "Thank you. But for real, no tail. I'll be back in 48 hours or less."

Chapter Nine

Volic sat in the dark-stained wooden chair, shrouded in the darkness, his icy blue eyes looked out from under his hood angrily and quietly listened to Rory explain why he couldn't open a dimensional portal into Chi-Town again, "My master, I would need to have Kent with me to open the portal. I had his help; he looked into the mind of the Coalition soldier and provided the ritual with its destination."

Looking down and dropping to his scaled knees, Rory whispered, "I am sorry master."

The crumbled stone tower laid about them. Only Volic's chair was undamaged and clean. Volic adjusted himself on the throne and leaned forward to whisper at Rory, "I can bring the pain back you know."

Rory cried silently, nodding his head, "I understand my master. I deserve the pain. I cannot repeat the ritual without a Mind Melter or having been to the location myself. If we can capture more CS soldiers and get a Mind Melter who can read their minds...then I can do it."

Volic sighed, "If you had a willing CS soldier to provide you with a destination would the ritual work?"

Rory wiped his reptilian eyes on his sleeve and looked up at the master, "Yes. But. What CS soldier would..."

Volic held up his hand and Rory stopped speaking.

Volic leaned back in his chair, the wood creaking, and smiled, "My desire was to cripple Chi-Town but I think the plan can be altered some. Go to Earth, get Ares and Damien. Bring them here. I will provide you with all the energy you need for the ritual. Ares and Damien will provide you the destination. We will open a portal into Iron Heart, at its heart and I will destroy the city."

Rory made a confused face, "Master? Ares and Damien are CS soldiers? I thought Damien was a wild Stalker and Ares a Were-Beast."

Smiling widely, Volic chuckled, "They were CS soldiers. Until they became my Risen minions. Go. Hurry back."

Rory fumbled to a standing position and meekly said, "Yes master."

Rushing out of the dark room, Rory briefly glanced at the dying men nailed to the wall. They were human and D-Bee, they had arrived earlier and presented six large boxes to Volic. Volic had screamed at them for only bringing five of the missiles to him and subsequently killed each of them. Only the female in charge of the men was still alive. Chained and half-naked, she was lying unconscious on the dirty ground near Volic's chair. Rory smirked, the mercenaries were some of the remaining few of their group. Now the IHA would be dwindled down to almost no remaining members.

"I bet they wished they had stayed in Mexico," Rory snickered as he left.

Rory understood the master's plan and was eager to please the master and eager to hurt the Coalition. Opening a portal into the City of Iron and detonating the nuclear warheads there would please both the master and himself, Rory thought.

Chapter Ten

Cross and Radek sat quietly looking out at the forest ahead of them. Every so often, one or the other looked behind them. Cross sighed, "I'm beginning to wonder if Soto and Melissa are coming back. I know Grelic and Jimboy won't be returning."

Radek looked at Cross, "Oh? Thought I heard Grelic say he would. Figured Jimboy might."

Cross shook his head no, "Jimboy told me that he wished us well. He said he had songs to sing elsewhere. Without Jimboy to teleport Grelic back, the Simvan will have a long trip on foot. Besides, I don't know if the guy will make it. If I was that hurt I'd take a break from hunting Demons."

Radek nodded and sighed.

Snow drifted down and the two sat quietly for a long while.

Radek said, "Look, I don't really care if you are CS or not anymore. As long as you are doing the right thing, I don't mind tagging along. What are we waiting for? If Soto and Melissa don't come back, what's your plan? I mean, do you have a plan or are you waiting for orders?"

Herjaza spoke to Cross in his mind, "Might be time to open up to the guy. He's been a real asset to your nonexistent team. Also Hon, if we are going to go after Volic someday it would be nice to have a powerhouse like Radek along."

Cross sighed, "I am part of a team of CS soldiers who don't officially exist, Radek. We do the things no one else in the CS can. There's more I could tell you but it's trivial. Simply put, my team doesn't exist. Ha, and now my team is gone who knows where. Other than you, thank you for sticking around."

Radek nodded, "Some kind of Special Forces undercover team. I figured as much. Soto struck me as a super killing machine and you as the brains. Both dangerous in my opinion. But like I said, long as you are doing the right thing."

Cross was about to say something when Radek said, "I saw something."

Both men hunkered down in the snow further.

Herjaza said, "Yes. About 200 feet north, coming from your right. One man. I recognize him. I can't sense any others but I sense the man called Major René Soren of IH7."

Cross pointed to the north and whispered, "It's the Major we met. The SF Major."

Radek grumbled, "I saw a slight movement out that way but can't see anything now."

Cross thought about it and said, "Normally, I'd split up and circle back around on him. I didn't think he would be a future threat to us. If he is alone I wonder if it has anything to do with Soto?"

Radek said, "Tell you what. I didn't survive these last few years as a Juicer by being lazy. I'll walk out and confront him. You keep him sighted in. Sound good?"

Cross pulled his C-20 energy pistol out and said, "No rifle."

Radek stood up and handed Cross his JA-12 rifle.

As the Juicer made his way down the snowy hill to the north, Cross sighted in on the last place Radek had seen movement and watched.

Herjaza said, "Oh I do like the Special Forces Major. He's good. He's over to Radek's west now."

Turning the JA-12 westward, Cross looked out across the snow. The glare was killer on his eyes. René was using the setting sun to help camouflage his position.

Radek stopped walking and loudly said, "That you, Major?"

Slowly standing up so that both Cross and Radek could see him, René called out, "Kinda. It's Lieutenant Colonel now but yes, it's me René."

Radek asked, "You alone? No team?"

René nodded his head yes, "Just me. Need to talk to RC. Can I come closer without spooking you?"

Radek laughed, "I won't shoot you as long as you don't pull a gun out."

Several minutes later, Cross and Radek sat in the snow listening to the newly promoted Lt. Colonel, "So after we were out hunting down this Hell Lord Fury and his Terror Army, and we got some real nice hit and runs in on them, we were prepped for EVAC when I got orders to both kill you RC and to not kill you. Apparently, Chi-Town wants you dead for assisting Hell Lord Fury in sending Xiticix into Chi-Town. Major Ronan Cross is enemy number two right after Grandma Tarn."

Radek grumbled, "The hell, man. We stopped those Xiticix and it had nothing to do with a Hell Lord."

Cross nodded, "CS Intel put the blame where they decided it needed to go."

René nodded, "As Special Forces I see a lot of things that actually went one way and are then spun around by Intel or Propaganda and turned into something else altogether. Here's the deal, Chi-Town wants your head Major, but my commanding officer in SF says that a Colonel Hunter wants you to disappear. I'm to tell you this Colonel Hunter may someday recontact you in order to activate you. So, I'm to go back and tell Chi-Town I killed you. You can't resurface around the CS or I and Colonel Hunter and a General Harrison are dead meat. I don't mind risking my neck for a fellow Iron Heart soldier but I need your word Cross. I need my family back home to be safe. I need you to promise to disappear."

Radek muttered, "Damn politics."

Cross nodded and had a faraway look, "Yes. I promise. Major Ronan Saint Cross is dead. I'll go by RC and say my goodbyes to the City of Iron and the CS. I have no wish to endanger you René."

René nodded, "What will you do RC?"

RC smiled, "Maybe Radek will hire me?"

Radek laughed, "Got a resume? Ha, sure, I guess Radek's Raiders will hire you but the pay sucks and I don't expect to be alive more than a dozen more years with these chemicals flowing through me."

"Um, that's twice as long as Juicers normally live," said RC.

"Well, I'm special," said Radek.

René shook their hands and saluted RC, "Good luck, gentlemen."

Making his way back down the snowy hill, Lt. Colonel René Soren left.

Herjaza said in RC's mind, "Better than death I suppose. Don't worry RC, you still have me."

Chapter Eleven

Tesla kept the ATV at near maximum speed. Bumping across the uneven terrain of the makeshift dirt road, she headed towards the town in the distance. Both Fay and Brad had repeatedly commented on her breakneck speed, complaining that if they crashed on the way, they would be of no help to the town in danger. Only Sir Lars had kept quiet. Tes glanced at him out of the corner of her eye as she slid around a corner in the gravel roadway. She suspected that his being silent was his form of complaining since the man had hardly shut up since she met him. His normal jovial attitude was replaced by a solemn, deadpan expression as he sat in Fay's usual seat.

Tes stated, "If you're worried then maybe you should stop distracting me and go back to the passenger area and strap in."

Ramming a tree small that was partly blocking the path she was speeding across, Tes concentrated on her driving.

Leaving the tree line, Sir Lars looked out the right passenger window at the Ley Line in the distance. Driving across the open expanse of grass, covered by snow, Tes made new tracks through the field.

Cresting a hill she slammed the brakes on and slid to a mostly controlled stop. Ahead of them, about 200 feet away, stood a tall white furred wolf man, a hunched over Psi-Stalker and an even taller Lizard Man in body armor.

For a moment Tes watched as the lizard appeared to be casting a spell. Sir Lars was up and out of his seat and running towards the back hatch, yelling, "Out! It's them. Let's get them."

Tes finally reacted, grabbing her TW rifle, she followed the Cyber-Knight. When her armored boots hit the snow outside, she ran around to the front of the ATV behind three sets of other tracks in the snow. Standing behind Fay who was aflame with her physic Burster powers, she looked past Brad and Lars.

There was no one standing where the trio of bad guys had been. Brad lowered his NE-101 rifle and said, "They got away!"

Sir Lars, who had a crackling blue, large Claymore style Psi-Sword in each of his hands, let the swords disappear and looked glum.

Fay muttered, "They Rifted or something."

Sir Lars suddenly ignited one Psi-Sword and a Psi-Shield and moved towards the right of the ATV saying, "Company."

Fay was still alight, surrounded by the glowing flames of her fiery protective field of energy, she followed Sir Madden melting snow as she ran.

Brad Spartan lifted the NE-101 with ease as he moved to follow in his light power armor suit. Tesla activated her Armor of Ithan by pushing a button and she followed Brad. The four of them stood ready, watching as off in the distance, two armored men advanced towards them.

* * *

Radek stomped through the knee-deep snow towards the ATV in the distance. Cross moved through the snow next to him, holding a private conversation with Herjaza.

"I can feel the egress point. It definitely leads to Volic's dimension. Once you ascertain who these others are we should go after Volic while we have the opportunity to do such."

Cross replied, "Okay. But let me see if we can recruit some help first. Last time, we barely made it out. You're sure that was Ares and Damien with the Lizard Mage? I am going to kill Volic for doing this to them."

Stopping some sixty feet away from the four adventurers, Radek and Cross stopped walking.

The man wearing Cyber-Knight armor made a move forward when a woman dressed in Gladius power armor held up her hand and said, "I am Tes. That's far enough. Who are you?"

Radek glanced at Cross and then raised his hands up in a non-threatening manner.

Cross spoke, "My name is RC. This is my friend Radek. We are hunting down three monsters who were just here. I assume that either your group is also hunting them, or you work for the vile fellows or you just happened along. If you do work for the monsters I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to surrender. Otherwise we might be able to work together."

"Diplomatic as always," Herjaza spoke to Cross.

Tes laughed, "Surrender? Us? Well, lucky for you we are hunting these monsters. Until now we had assumed it was just two. But I guess there are three. What do you know of these monsters?"

Cross stepped closer, saying, "They are bad. Work for worse. Need to be followed to the dimension they just went to and they all need to be killed before they can harm more people."

Tesla nodded and Brad laughed, "You a mage, feller? Can you open a portal?"

Cross looked at the man dressed in light power armor then back at the woman named Tesla, "Look, this is what I know; I've fought the Lizard Mage before, thought he was dead. The Wolf is a former CS Psi-Hound, he was my friend. I thought he was dead, the Psi-Stalker was a friend of mine too. Both he and the Wolf were dead. I checked. They must be risen from the grave somehow. The lizard is a foul-hearted Shifter. The three of them work for a Demon Lord named Volic. I'm going after them."

Sir Lars said, "This sounds like a worthy quest, sir. These risen have been slaying innocent people in nearby villages. If they work for some nefarious Demon Lord and you can get us to the thing, then I'm game."

Tes thought about it as Fay and Brad looked at her, then said, "Listen. We want to stop the risen things too. If you can get us to them we will assist you in killing the demon who is in charge. What else can you tell me? Can the six of us take the thing out?"

Cross explained, "Volic is a Godling type of Demon Lord. He's powerful by himself but I nearly killed him myself once. I know the demon lives in a pocket dimension and has terrorized Earth for a long time. He looks like an albino man and has at least one Shifter, the lizard, and two risen, Ares and Damien, with him. He had other creatures and a bunch of shadow creatures with him last time. I can get us to his home but I, for one, need to get some gear first."

Radek interjected, "I think we might want a fire or something to get warm. Then you can tell us everything you know. How's that sound?"

Fay grinned, "I'll get a fire going but don't start without me. I want to hear this too."

Radek and Fay moved to prepare a fire and Cross moved forward to shake the others' hands.

Once the fire was blazing and they all huddled close to its warmth, Cross told them all, a version of what had occurred, the last time he and Reaper Cell had accessed Volic's home. He left out that Reaper Cell was a CS team. Didn't tell them that he was a former Commando, but told the rest of the story about Volic and the Xiticix attack on Chi-Town.

Tes spoke first once Cross was finished, "So now you are wanted by the CS and the Demon Lord is still alive terrorizing people? Let's get the supplies you need and do this thing."

Radek stood up and said, "I am going to Northern Gun. I'll be back tonight and we can head out in the morning. I'll get weapons and new armor for me and RC. That Juicer plate you're wearing under your coat has seen better days."

Cross looked up at Radek, "Unless you are teleporting, I don't see how you can do that, that fast Radek."

Radek smiled, "I'm a fast runner. Trust me, RC. I'll be back by nightfall."

Running towards the Ley Line in the distance, the others watched as Radek ran at about sixty miles per hour. Once he approached the Line, he simply disappeared.

Cross said, "I'll be damned."

* * *

Radek stepped out of the Ley Line onto the hardened dirt which appeared well traveled. Making his way across the dirt and adding his footprints to many others, he walked to the freshly paved roadway. Squatting down, he ran his fingers over the pavement.

He had heard that Northern Gun kept the roadways around their giant manufacturing city state clean and repaired. There were supposed to be NG Highway Patrol Officers who patrolled the roads too. Glancing around, Radek stood back up and looked to the west down along the highway. In the distance, he could see many adventurers, travelers and mercenaries gathered outside a massive arched entrance to the famous city.

His Juicer harness kicked chemicals into his blood, in a blurring fast fraction of a second, he spun around, pulling the NG-LP45 energy pistol from his leg holster and trained it on the man who had suddenly appeared behind him.

The man, dressed in traditional garb of a Line Walker, looked over at Radek and said, "Hello there. Relax feller, I mean you no harm. Don't get all jacked on me. I'm just traveling to Northern Gun."

Radek lowered the gun and nodded as the man stepped onto the highway and walked towards the city, ignoring him as he went on his way.

Stepping onto the even highway, Radek walked along the edge of the road about fifty feet behind the Walker. Noticing movement off to his right, he made an effort to not overly react as two rocket bikes sped through the Line and advanced towards the highway.

One bike hovered across the distance and rocketed off towards the city. The other bike slowed and the pilot grinned down at Radek.

It took a concerted effort to not draw his pistol again as he looked at the Brodkil Sub-Demon who was watching him. Looking at Radek, the demon said, "You need a lift, Juicer? I'm headed in."

Radek had expected something more menacing from the big red demon and shook his head no, "I'm good, thank you."

The demon took a moment and attached a helmet to his body armor then sped towards the city then leaving Radek to walk.

Between the Ley Line and the city's entrance, Radek saw several more groups emerge either out of the forest or from the Line to make their way towards Northern Gun.

As he approached the archway he saw a massive conglomeration of people, humans, D-Bees, mercenaries, spell casters,

vehicles and mounts. All converging on the heavily guarded arch or the huge parking facility adjacent to the entryway.

Radek suddenly realized that this was merely the designated parking area, not the actual entrance to the city. He was amazed at the parking area which was as large or larger than many towns he had been to.

Radek saw that the people of NG had cut down trees, creating a wide expanse around the industrial city, undoubtedly to enable defenders the ability to see raiders or invading armies miles before they could get to the city itself.

Coming to the end of the thousand foot wide, paved road, Radek stood in a group of mixed D-Bees and humans looking out at the hundreds of people set up in campsites with their tents stretching along dirt and gravel paths adjacent to the paved road and was two miles from the actual city gates. Mounts and vehicles were left at the parking and stable area and everyone was encouraged to check their larger weapons and proceed on foot to the gate.

Several people pushed past Radek as he people watched the mass of travelers and visitors.

"Incredible and impressive, isn't it?" a voice said next to him. Glancing to his right, he saw that a white-haired, older woman wearing some sort of Leaf Armor accompanied by a tall Native American Indian was standing next to him. He nodded and smiled at her.

Smiling, Radek said, "This is my first time here. I wasn't sure what to expect."

The woman smiled back, saying, "It's even bigger in the city. Northern Gun has streets filled with crowds of people, vehicles, robots, lights, and the sounds of music, announcers, and pure adrenaline. The city of Northern Gun is the gem of the Ishpeming Republic, and is even more of a brightly colored wonderland inside."

"I'm sure to find what my group needs here, then," said Radek. "Thank you. I assume you've been here before?"

The Knight spoke, "The large, bunker-like buildings are way-stations where you can stow your weapons and gear that are not allowed in the city. If you don't read well then audio instructions are announced at intervals, and there are hundreds of kiosks out here and inside with headphones for more detailed information and instructions if you get lost."

Radek looked down at himself. He was wearing his armor and had only his pistol with him. Asking the Knight, "Will I be allowed in with just this?" he pointed at his pistol.

"Yes, Dear," said the woman. "Swords, side arms, and body armor are allowed in the city, though discouraged, but to keep the people and property of Ishpeming safe, heavier weapons such as rifles, power armor, and combat vehicles are not allowed into the city, and must be left behind."

Radek joined the two as they matched step with the others walking towards the city. After a few minutes of silence, Radek noticed several well-armed and armored individuals making their way from the side of the throng of people towards him. As they approached, a large neon sign over the road which read, "Welcome, you are entering Ishpeming, Home of Northern Gun." He could hear an audio recording

saying, "Welcome to Northern Gun," blaring from speakers on the sign.

Turning to look at the Knight and his escort, Radek said, "I cannot imagine what I might have done to attract the attention of the advancing soldiers coming towards us. Would you have any idea why they seem intent on making their way towards us?"

The Cyber-Knight stopped walking forward and looked at the oncoming group of NG soldiers.

The woman laughed and said, "I imagine they recognize me. We hadn't announced our arrival but I seem to be met by the NG reps every time I come. I wouldn't be worried. I'm sorry, I never did get your name, sir."

Radek held out his right hand and said, "My manners must have been lost, I am Mikkel Radek."

Taking his hand, she smiled and said, "This is Sir Thorpe my escort and friend. I am Erin Tarn."

Shaking her hand carefully, he glanced at the Knight then looked back at her. "I do believe I have heard the name before. Just yesterday your name came up in a conversation. My friend, who is waiting for me back at our camp, is on the same Coalition list as you. He of course is wrongly accused of being a CS traitor. Poor guy was a CS Major who learned too much."

Erin laughed, again saying, "Unfortunately, knowledge is deemed dangerous by the CS. Would you care to skip the long line and head in with us?"

Sir Thorpe grumbled, "You are incorrigible, Erin, this gentleman may be a dangerous outlaw and you are offering him passage into the city via a shortcut? I seem to recall shortcuts such as our portal-opening Mexican Shifter once gave us, causing us to visit another world."

Frowning at her friend, Erin said, "We learned a lot on Wormwood I seem to recall."

Radek's eyes opened wide, "You have been to Wormwood? I was unfortunate enough to find myself outside a Demon City called Hellvat near the Demon Bridge at one point. I heard of a great dimensional city called World Gate although I never made it there."

Sir Thorpe rolled his eyes and Erin continued, "Oh yes. We were able to return to Earth after making our way to World Gate. A few autographs later and we were back on Earth."

Reaching into her pack, she pulled a book out, opened it and asked Radek how to spell his name. Radek thought about it and replied, "I don't read very well but my friend does. If you want to sign a personalized book you could make it out to a Major Ronan Saint Cross, he'd probably be happy to have it."

Scribbling in the book, she returned her pen to her pack and handed Radek the book. Placing the book into his small backpack, he thanked her.

As six NG LPO officers dressed in stylized outfits approached them, one called out to Ms. Tarn, "Greeting and welcome back, Ms. Tarn. If you'll follow me we will escort you into the city."

"Thank you young man. This is Sir Thorpe and Mr. Radek, they'll be coming with me."

The officer glanced at Radek and then back to Erin Tarn. "Of course ma'am. This way, if you please."

The three of them followed the six soldiers off to the left of the main gate and were let into the city by a security door in the wall. Radek smiled at the Knight and Scholar as he followed them.

Once through the doorway they continued to follow the men. Radek said, "We are, my friends and I, headed off world to stop a Demon Lord from wreaking havoc on people of the towns in Canada and I am here to get gear for that. I am glad I met you Ms. Tarn. I should bid you safe travels and thanks for the book. I will leave you to your business and shall go attend to mine."

Erin shook Radek's hand again and said, "It is nice to meet a man dedicated to helping others, Mr. Radek. I wish you well in your mission. My best to your friends."

Following her armed escort, Sir Thorpe nodded at Radek and followed her.

Radek separated from the group and moved down the crowded city street towards what appeared to be an Armor Dealer's shop.

Half a day later, he had the items he had come for and had eaten an exotic meal from a food stall on the roadside. Making his way back through throngs of shoppers and visitors, Radek made his way to the exit Arch.

He was no longer on foot, having purchased a Road King Armored SUV. Driving slowly to avoid running anyone over, he proceeded out of the city thinking that he would have to return someday when life allowed it. Northern Gun was too large to take all of it in, in just one day.

With the SUV packed full of weapons, armor and other gear and supplies, he headed out towards the Ley Line. Parking the SUV at the Line, he spent the next hour Phasing back and forth between the SUV and the campsite the others were waiting at. Carrying supplies back and forth between the two locations took him the rest of the day. Finally, he had an empty SUV which he sold at a third of the original price he had paid that morning to a passing gentleman who was excited to buy the vehicle at such a low price.

Standing in the campsite far across the Bay from NG, Radek passed out the remaining food he had purchased to the others. Cross sat by the fire flipping pages in the book Radek had given him.

Sir Lars stated, "I am turning in. In the morning I suggest we pack and head off on this adventure. Good night."

Radek sat down by the campfire and glanced over the flames at Fay who intently watched the crackling fire. Her sister, Tesla, was toying with her TW rifle, making adjustments to it. Brad Spartan sat in a ratty, old lawn chair and cleaned his NE-101 energy rifle.

As Cross, or RC, read the book given to him, he looked up at Radek, saying, "Thank you for getting gear, and for the signed book. I'm still amazed that a Juicer can Ley Line Phase, you'll have to explain that one to me at some point."

Radek smiled and nodded at RC, leaning back to look up at the stars, he said, "I'm still amazed that a Coalition Com-

mando is using a Rune Sword, there's one that needs explaining. Tomorrow is going to be interesting."

Thinking to himself, Radek wondered if this albino Demon Lord really was the one who had killed his biological parents. It didn't really matter at this point he supposed. The creature needed to be dealt with.

* * *

The next morning arrived and the six adventurers prepared for combat. Dressing in armor, power armor and checking weapons, each of them were quiet.

Cross spoke with Herjaza, mind to mind, "You are ready? You're going to be able to open the portal to Volic's realm?"

The silver sword replied, "Of course I will. The spot of egress the Lizard Mage used to take Ares and Damien to Volic's pocket dimension is known but just so you know Dear, I will only be able to access the entry point located along the dirt path. You see, the dimension is quirky, it was created by the Godling, a Demon Lord named Volic Prime, who ended up becoming trapped in the pocket. The dimension of Vol is located within the larger dimension of an alternate Earth Universe. Access to the pocket dimension is extremely difficult and similar to the pocket dimension of the Norse Gods, in that the only way to access Valhalla is across the rainbow bridge. So be prepared to fight your way to Volic's temple."

Cross muttered, "Right. Like Valhalla. I'll be sure to explain it that way to the others."

Chapter Twelve

The members of Spectre Cell currently had their own Death's Head Transport. Converted as an aerial headquarters with all kinds of sensor equipment, they listened as Melissa explained how she could provide them information while they were on the ground and she was far overhead.

Captain Kief nodded, saying, "I'll run our operations from here in the DHT with Melissa. Our prisoner is locked in the newly designed prison, aft. When we need the mage we'll get him out. When you are deployed, you will call me Zero on the radio. The DHT is the Sandbox. You'll each have a call sign, Bravo One is Sergeant Major Soto. Bravo Two is John Grainger. Bravo Three is Melissa. Bravo Four is Owen and Bravo Five is Jack. The mage is Victor One. Our pilot and crew are available by Comms but sealed off from us. In about two hours we will be landing in Free Quebec where the CS Ohio made an emergency dock. Prep for mission and when we are outside the DHT, you will not talk to any Quebec personnel. Bravo One."

"Alright, we got a few hours," said Soto. "I want to run some drills, so gear up. Go."

"I expect this mission to be somewhat chaotic," said Kief. "You enter the Ohio with Victor One, and open a portal to unknown location. You guys go in, radio back to me. If it's a faraway location, Melissa and I will grab mobile command gear and come with you, otherwise we will fly to you."

Soto grunted in the affirmative and made his way towards the rest of the team to gear up. Being part of Spectre Cell as a Wayfarer Infiltrator assigned to this Reprisal mission under the command of Capt. Kief was definitely more structured than it had been with Major Cross. It felt like the whole operation, the Disavowed in general, were getting locked on as to how to operate as a whole. Soto geared up, watching the others.

Once the team was ready, he had them each run through their gear and specialties for the other members. Knowing your team members and what they had would be helpful. Everyone was wearing and using purely non-CS gear. Nothing as wild as Rune Weapons, most of the gear and weapons were manufactured by Northern Gun.

Soto had dark camouflage painted NG-A10 body armor on while the rest wore NG-A12 Ballistic armor. They all had NG-P7 particle beam rifles and NG-PB713 pistols as side arms. Almost everyone had one or two Vibro-Knives. They looked like a well outfitted mercenary company.

Tracking down the nuclear weapon thieves to wherever they had fled to and killing them, destroying or retreating with the warheads would be dangerous but they'd have the element of surprise and some highly trained CS operatives on this op. Soto had to admit he was glad that Melissa wouldn't be used as a front-line operative.

* * *

Exiting the DHT, Soto, Grainger, Owen and Jack made their way across the landing tarmac towards the river docks. They were escorted by two full squads of Quebec Special Forces soldiers who kept their distance and didn't bother to speak to them. Soto noticed they kept their weapons off safe and seemed nervous to be escorting them. He wondered what story they had been told. Both Jack and Owen had the captured mage held between them. The man was stripped down to an orange jumpsuit and shackled.

After several minutes, the five of them and their escorts made it to the docks. Grainger entered the walkway which led to the docked CS Ohio and Jack pushed the mage along behind the man. Both Owen and Soto followed. Pushing the transmit button on his throat mic, Soto said, "Bravo team entering the Ohio."

Melissa responded over the secure radio, "Bravo Three and Zero copy."

Following the others, Soto saw the SF escort squads stop at the top of the gangplank and wait.

Soto allowed himself a moment to marvel at the submarine as they made their way into it. The five of them ducked as they made their way deeper into the CS Ohio. Signs of battle were evident and Soto thought, these sailors were lucky the fighting hadn't punched a hole in the side and sunk the sub.

Grainger said, "We are almost there. We will be at the spot where they Rifted away from momentarily."

Soto watched the mage and thought, he seems pretty calm for being shackled and pushed about by the Dog Boy and Owen who both obviously held no love for the spell caster.

Grainger stopped in the intersection of two passages and pointed at a wall with severe structural damage, "Here."

The mage ran his shackled hands over the surface of the damaged wall then turned and looked at Soto.

"Remove his gag, and if he tries anything odd shoot him," said Soto.

Jack tore the gag out and the mage muttered, "Geez. Thanks." Turning back to face the wall, the mage continued to inspect it.

After several minutes he nodded and turned back to face Soto.

Soto nodded and radioed, "Zero. Bravo Team is prepared to proceed."

Melissa responded, "We copy. Zero says to remember to just send two of you through and radio back."

Looking the mage in his eyes, Soto said, "Do it."

Turning back to face the wall the mage began his spell.

Both Jack and Owen kept their weapons trained on the mage as Soto and Grainger pointed theirs at the wall.

Unceremoniously, several minutes later, the wall became transparent and a snowy field came into view. The mage sat down suddenly and looked very tired.

Soto nodded at Grainger who advanced into the open portal as Soto raised his hand gun into position Sul and radioed, "Bravo One and Two are headed through the portal."

Stepping through the portal behind Brave Two, Soto stepped out into the deep snow and looked around. Grainger moved forward and took cover behind a fallen tree. Soto crouched down behind him and looked up at the clear night sky, trying to determine where on Earth, or elsewhere, they were.

The snowy forest seemed like Earth and he could made out several constellations in the night sky, which he recognized. Soto radioed back to Melissa, "It looks like Earth. Stand by as I work on charting our location."

"Zero copies."

Laying several maps out onto the fallen log, Soto looked up at the night sky with binoculars.

Grainger said, "What is that?"

Soto glanced down at his maps and said, "It's several maps of the sky in the northern hemisphere. I have them for helping me locate where we are. If we were not on Earth they'd be useless but I can see several objects in the sky like that nebula and that galaxy and that star cluster over there which will help me figure out our location."

Grainger said, "Okay. I have no idea what you are talking about but good on you. So where are we?"

Soto set the binoculars down for a moment and looked at Grainger, "Give me a moment. This isn't exactly easy or exact."

Looking back through the portal into the CS Ohio, Grainger said, "Hang on guys."

Owen leaned through the portal, his body on the Ohio and his head poking out into the cold air of the snowy forest. Looking around, Owen asked, "Much longer?"

Soto growled, "Hold on, geez. Don't do that. If the portal closes unexpectedly, I'm not carrying your head all the way back to Quebec."

Owen quickly returned to the Ohio and grumbled.

Several minutes later, Soto folded up his old sky maps and radioed, "Zero. It's not exact science but I figure we are in Canada. Near the Hudson Bay. Orders?"

The radio crackled and Soto heard, "Bravo Team, take Victor One and secure that location with Bravo One. We will fly to the Hudson Bay Area. Have your homing beacon on in one hour and keep the radio on."

Owen and Jack escorted the mage through the portal as it closed behind them.

Soto grinned at Grainger and said, "If you thought that was cool wait till we do the next thing."

Owen and Jack crunched through the snow and guarded the mage who moved to sit on part of a fallen log. Soto handed a small electronic device to Grainger and explained, "While we wait for Zero, let's pinpoint our location even more. Have you ever heard of radio triangulation? Let me show you how it works. In the past, I've done this to call in long-range air strikes."

* * *

The pilot of the DHT acknowledged the orders from his mysterious passengers aft and looked at his co-pilot.

"Whatever, man," said the co-pilot. "I don't know why we are flying all over for these guys, but orders are orders."

Captain Teller nodded and said, "I just don't get why the guy keeps calling himself Zero, and us, Sandbox. I told him who I was. Whatever. This is why I am a pilot and not some crazy Special Forces nut. Set a course and let Quebec Flight Control know we are out of here."

* * *

Melissa looked up from her computers and at Captain Kief, "I've got their beacon Sir. I'll direct the pilot to Bravo Team's location. We'll be overhead in ten."

Kief nodded and said, "Good job, Bravo Three. Can you open a transmission to the team?"

Melissa nodded and adjusted the radio.

Soto and the others had explored the area a little after setting up an encoded broadcast beacon. Owen and Jack were still guarding the mage and trying to stay warm. Owen was fine. Being a Burster he was cozy, and chuckled each time Jack or the mage shivered.

Soto and Grainger were still out exploring the area when they heard over the secure radio, "Bravo Team, this is Zero. Copy?"

Crouching down behind a copse of snow-covered evergreen trees, Soto keyed up his throat mic, "Bravo One here. Copy. You'd do well to maintain a high altitude since we've seen several pirate ships in the bay. Bravo Four and Five have Victor One secure. Two and I have located what we think is a hidden base along the coastline."

Capt. Kief responded, "Hidden base? How'd you find it? Have you had any luck locating the guys who took the war-heads?"

Soto frowned, "Zero, we walked the coastline near where the portal led to. From the coastline you can see an inlet where

a ship can move into an alcove and dock. There is one ship here now. It looks like a Black Eel Torpedo Boat. Grainger, Bravo Two, says it's exactly the kind of boat the IHA would have. Additionally, we saw two guards up on the land closer to the portal location who are guarding what looks like an old sewer tunnel. I'm thinking Bravo Two and I could take out the guards and check out the sewer. Seems probable the sewer leads into this dock."

"Zero copies. We will maintain a high altitude and continue to monitor your progress. Be advised we will target the Black Eel and stand by for further information from you. Once you are ready, the DHT can blow up the Eel. Proceed, Bravo Team."

Soto nodded at Grainger. Splitting up, they moved further into the darkness and silently advanced on the guards.

Soto could see the two men standing on the sewer entrance with his nightvision-enhanced cybernetic eyes. It was a raised platform made of concrete. Both men stood atop it looking out into the darkness. As Soto slowly advanced on the sewer, he saw that one man, the one closer to Grainger's approach, was smoking a cigarette. The other man had his helmet on still. Soto thought about how he would quietly kill the helmeted man as he continued to move across the snow. Grainger would have an easier time of it and would be able to strike the unhelmeted man with a garrote or knife to the neck. Soto needed to do the same but would have to take the guy out while in full environmental armor.

Leaning against the base of the raised concrete platform, Soto quietly ran through his options. A green light inside of his helmet flickered on and off, signaling that Grainger was in position and ready.

Soto signaled a go to Grainger as he reached up and grabbed the guard's feet. Using both hands Soto, grabbed onto the man's feet and violently pulled the man down into the snowbank located at the base of the platform. Thankfully, the snow muffled the sound of the man falling down and landing face first in the snow.

Pouncing onto the man's back, Soto slapped his right hand over the visor of the man's helmet and pushed the on button to the magnetic flash-stun device. Lights rapidly and sporadically flashed brightly before the man's eyes. It wasn't his smoothest kill, he thought to himself as he hauled the man up and repeatedly slammed the guards head into the concrete wall. Most of the blinding light was pulsing into the guard's helmeted head, but Soto kept his eyes closed anyway in order to not be blinded. After six hard slams of the helmeted guy's head into the wall, he reached out and flicked the flash-stun off. Quickly, Soto started unsnapping the helmet from the armor. Three out of four locking mechanisms were detached when the man mumbled, "What..." Soto rammed the guy's head into the wall again and finished unlocking the last fastener.

The guard's arms raised out to his sides and Soto heard the man vomit in the helmet. The lights of the flash-stun did that. Soto kicked the man down into the snow and kept his right boot on the guys back as he ripped the helmet off. Vomit splattered across snow and Soto thrust his knife into the base of the man's skull from behind.

Looking up, Soto saw Grainger looking down at him. He had a bloody knife in his left hand and was pointing his pulse pistol at the now dead guard at Soto's feet.

Grainger nodded and holstered the pistol and bent down to clean his knife off on the body of the other dead guard.

As Soto leaned over the man he had killed he grabbed a handful of the guard's long hair and cleaned his knife.

Grainger radioed for Owen and Jack to bring the mage and meet up at the concrete platform.

After the three arrived, Owen looked around and quietly said, "I thought there were two guards?"

Jack sniffed at the air, turned and used his boot to lightly kick a mound of snow, "They're here. Buried in this snow-drift."

Grainger nodded and pointed at the mage, "Unshackle him."

Owen balked and said, "What?"

"Unchain him," said Soto. "When we go into the sewer I want Grainger behind me, then Jack, Ulric next, with Owen behind him. Maintain this marching order and keep your eyes on Ulric, Owen."

The mage, Ulric, said, "Thank you. Since I am wearing a bright orange jumpsuit and no armor. I'm going to create a protective barrier around me in case I get shot at, alright?"

Soto slowly nodded, "Alright but no funny stuff or we will make killing you our priority. Now, line up and stay tight. Follow me."

Moving down the metal walkway into the sewer the five advanced slowly. Soto led them deeper into the darkness and maintained his nightvision. The others either used nightvision goggles or their built-in thermo-imaging in their helmets. Only the mage was unable to see as they advanced further.

At the bottom of the metal walkway, Soto stopped and motioned the others to wait. Reaching into his pack, he pulled out an electronic lock pick device and examined the door. The heavy metal door stayed closed and adjacent to it, located on the wall, was a keypad. Before using the electronic device Soto reached out and turned the door handle. Chuckling in his mind, he shook his head. The door wasn't locked. Opening the door into the room beyond, he pushed his right hand out, away from his chest, and pointed the particle beam pistol into the room as he held onto the swinging door.

Empty. More of a long corridor than an actual room, he stepped inside with the others close behind.

The concrete and metal corridor was illuminated by several bulbs which hung from the ceiling. At the far end of the hallway, Soto saw another closed door. Making their way into the hallway, Bravo Team advanced on the far doorway.

Soto's amplified hearing alerted him to movement on the other side of the door. Raising his left hand, he signaled for the others to stop. Unlike the previous heavy metal door, this one was made of wood.

Soto listened to voices only he could hear.

"This is stupid. Gayle and the others should be back by now" a voice said.

It was answered by another voice beyond the door, "I say we get Tom and Andrew and load up the nuke on the Black Eel and get the hell out of here."

The first voice replied, "If we split before Gayle returns she'll be mad as hell. You know she would hunt us down and kill us if it took a lifetime."

Voice two stated, "Yeah, but. Gayle should have returned by now. What if that Lizard Man betrayed her? I hate D-Bees, man. I bet that giant Lizard Mage betrayed her and is going to return with a whole horde of lizards and take the last nuke."

Voice one replied, "Shut up. Go check on Tom and Andrew. Just shut up, Bob."

"Fine. I'll shut up but mark my words, Larry, this bodes not well"

Soto signaled for the others to get down. Both Grainger and Soto took up positions on either side of the door and pointed their NG-P7 particle beam rifles towards it. The others quietly laid down in the hallway behind the Ranger and CS SEAL.

Soto heard the one mercenary move closer to the door. Suddenly the other mercenary yelled, "Something's wrong! Look out!"

Soto and Grainger moved as one. Soto turned the latch of the door and Grainger thrust his left shoulder into the door. The door flew open towards the two mercenaries inside. Soto fired his rifle and saw the silent beam connect with the face of the closest merc. Headless, the man collapsed as Soto swiveled the rifle towards the other man. Grainger fired a blast from his rifle which punched into the merc's midsection. With an audible grunt, the merc whined and waved his hands about in front of himself. Soto fired twice and realized his particle beams were stopping right before the man. He had erected some kind of magic or psionic barrier in front of himself.

Grainger kicked out at the man but his foot stopped prior to reaching him, the barrier prevented him from connecting. Soto fired twice more, the beams connecting with the barrier. Soto hoped to do enough damage to decimate the barrier.

The man punched his hand out at Grainger and a telekinetic punch hit the SEAL right in the chest, flinging him backwards.

Soto was surprised to see the helmet-less man yelling presumably at the top of his lungs, however no sound could be heard. The mercenary was obviously concerned also because he shut his mouth and looked startled.

Soto continued to pull the trigger on the rifle as fast as he could and flinched as a ball of flame burned past him, hitting the silenced mercenary squarely in the chest area, damaging his armor.

Soto grinned. The barrier was down. Tilting the rifle up, he fired at the man's head. Gore twisted through the air from the impact and the man collapsed to lay adjacent to his buddy.

Soto turned around to look at Grainger. The man was picking himself up off of the floor and seemed alright. Glancing toward Owen and Ulric, he trained the rifle at the mage.

Ulric smiled. Three small blue crackling balls of energy swirled about his right fist. Lowering his hands down to his sides, they disappeared. The mage shrugged and said, "Just trying to help Sergeant Major. Globe of Silence, earlier, by the way."

Soto offered Grainger a hand the rest of the way up. Looking at the mage, he just nodded.

Turning to the SEAL Soto quietly asked him, "You okay?" "Fine. Let's go."

Moving further into the underground bunker, they moved systematically, quietly clearing several empty rooms. Standing quietly in the hallway outside the last room, they lined up behind one another with Soto then Grainger at the lead. Standing behind Grainger, Jack tapped out a sequence of code on the man's shoulder. Grainger passed the message silently up to Soto who nodded.

Thinking to himself, Soto now knew that Jack could sense magic in the room they were about to enter, and he relayed hand messages back down the line. Owen pulled Ulric out of the line and pointed at the opposite wall. Ulric had no idea what the hand gestures meant, but understood Owen. "Get against the wall and don't move."

Soto signaled for Grainger and Jack to follow him into the room. They weren't going quietly anymore, this was about to be a dynamic entry. Soto held three fingers up and as he spoke through his throat mic, his fingers counted down, "Zero. Bravo One. Destroy that Black Eel. Now!"

"Zero copies."

Kicking the door open, Soto led Grainger and Jack into the room. Only one man was present, sitting at a desk studying some book, the man dropped the book in surprise and stood up. Soto, Grainger and Jack ran into the room, pointing their weapons at the man, with all three of them yelling, "Hands up!"

Startled at the sudden intrusion, the man started to raise his hands with a dumbfounded look on his face. The man nearly jumped out of his skin when a large explosion erupted outside, the Black Eel presumably being destroyed by the DHT.

Spreading out and training their rifles on the man, Bravo Team took in the room. Jack pointed at the desk. Several objects lay spread across its surface. Jack growled, "On the desk. Whatever is radiating magic is on the desk. The round object I think."

The lone man looked unhappy and said, "Who are you?! You don't want to mess with me. I work for the Iron Heart Avengers!"

Grainger let the rifle swing downwards on its sling to hang at his side. Pulling his particle beam pistol out of its holster, Grainger moved closer to the IHA man, pointing the pistol at him, he demanded, "Stolen warheads. Where are they?"

The man frowned then pointed across the room at one warhead partially under a tarp and said, "One warhead. Crap. You guys are CS, aren't you? The other five are not here. Gayle took them through a dimensional portal to sell to our employer."

Soto asked, "Who's the employer? Who is it you guys are selling the warheads to?"

The man started to lower his hands until Grainger motioned with the pistol for him to keep them up.

Lifting his hands up higher, the man said, "Look, I'm just an Operator. Not a combatant. Relax, I'm not going to cause you any trouble. Gayle is selling the other five warheads to

some albino-looking, madman demon lord guy. Not our usual clientele, however, the guy was paying. I mean really paying well. Are you guys CS?"

Soto said, "No. We are not CS. Where is this exchange happening?"

The Operator shrugged, "Hell, I don't know. His place. He opened a portal for Gayle to jump through. Speaking of her, she's going to kick your asses from here to Tampico if you don't clear out of here. You don't want to mess with her."

Jack placed the round object back down on the desk and turned to face, Soto, "Incoming! I sense more, big magic."

Soto saw the air shimmer behind Jack and pointed beyond the Dog Boy. Jack turned around to face the shimmering air as Grainger fired once. The Operator dropped dead and the SEAL holstered the pistol, pulling the rifle up to point it past Jack.

Soto frowned looking from the dead man to the shimmering air and trained his rifle at the space and yelled, "Owen. Ulric. Get in here and get ready for a fight."

Chapter Thirteen

The six of them stood near Cross, standing at the spot where the Lizard Man, Ares and Damien had vanished. Cross was wearing a suit of NG-UELX45 Night Reaper Stealth Power Armor with his C-20 energy pistol in one hand and Herjaza in the other. Tes had shown Cross how to attach the C-20 to the suit's power pack so that he wouldn't have to reload the pistol, drawing on the suit's power source instead of clips. After an hour of practice draws, he felt read. Though the two power cords attached to the pistol had been awkward at first and took some getting used to.

Radek had acquired a new suit of matte black Bushman Trooper Heavy environmental body armor and had a brand new NG-R50 Mini Rail Gun from his trip to Northern Gun. Loaded down with several drums of rounds, he was the only one present who could carry so much weight.

Tesla was still wearing her Techno-Wizard modified NG Gladius power armor and had her TW rifle and TW pistol while Fay was still in her armored fatigues with TW cloak and would rely on her Burster powers to fight.

Brad was decked out like the Bounty Hunter he was, wearing his Coyote hybrid exoskeleton and power armor suit and carrying an assortment of weapons, including the NE-101 rifle.

Sir Lars Madden was protected by his living Cyber-Armor under his heavy suit of Cyber-Knight body armor. He had an energy pistol attached to his hip but would rely on his Psi-Swords and Psi-Shield as he had always done from his days fighting demons in Washington to this battle.

Standing close to each other, the six stood in a circle facing each other as Cross holstered his C-20. Removing Herjaza from her leather sheath, he tucked the leather into his belt and held Herjaza two handed.

Lars chuckled when Tes said, "Dibs."

Brad looked confused and Fay explained, "Rune Sword obviously although I've never seen one before."

Tes grinned at Cross, saying, "Kidding. I'm sure we'll all make it back in one piece. That's a nice sword RC, and now I understand how a non-mage is going to cast spells. But seriously, dibs."

Cross had a faraway look for a moment, then chuckled to himself, saying, "She says, of the six of us, only I and Sir Lars are dark enough for her liking. Which raises the question of why would such a noble Knight as yourself be of interest to Herjaza."

Sir Madden just shrugged as the others looked at him then muttered, "Dibs?"

"Are you kidding me! Keep that Cyber-Knight away from me or I'll fry him," said Herjaza.

Cross thought back to Herjaza, "I'm sorry, I couldn't resist. No one but me is going to be hanging onto you."

Aloud, Cross said, "I'm kidding. No one touches the sword, got it? She'll fry you if you touch her."

"I prefer big guns anyway" Brad said.

Cross looked around at the others and said, "Alright. Here we go."

The shifting of realities and dimensional teleportation of the six humans from the cold, snowy field to the warm, dry and dark path of the pocket dimension was instantaneous.

Shrouded in utter darkness, the adventurers stood quietly and waited, collectively holding their breaths. A moment later, Tesla lifted a flashlight of her own design up and pushed the on button to the Techno-Wizard device. Light stabbed out of the handheld flashlight illuminating the dirt path they stood on.

Tes moved around to each of them in turn and flipped on the lights which were attached to each member's armor. The path and surrounding darkness was brightly lit a few moments later. The lights each member wore were all built by Tes. Instead of moving about and swiveling as the group moved to face the pathway leading towards the tower, each lighting system was designed to create a Globe of Daylight over the party. As the six of them made their way along the path, six globes of light followed them, creating a large area which was illuminated.

Brad grinned at Tes, saying, "Well done. We won't be blinding each other this way as we move around."

Radek nodded, "True. It's a cool lighting system but we are a blinding beacon showing our location to any creatures out there. They must know we have arrived. Be careful. Let's move. Lead the way, RC."

Cross nodded and pointed off along the path, saying, "Don't leave the path or Shadow creatures will get you. Stay together. This way."

As the six made their way, it was only a few minutes later that they could all see hundreds of glowing red eyes and a massive swirling shape which stayed at the edges of the globes of light.

Radek held up a hand and said, "Hell, those red eyes appear to be moving towards us. On the path!"

Moments later, four Shadow Hounds the size of tanks moved into view. The creatures obviously didn't like the bright lights glowing down from above but they continued to advance.

Cross turned his head around to talk to the others, "Don't disturb the rocks lining either side of the pathway or the hundreds will be able to get to us. Get these things!"

Streaks of fire soared across the path from Fay's hands and eyes, striking the Shadow Hounds. Howling and enraged, the hounds bolted towards them. Both Radek and Brad opened fire sending hundreds of rounds across the expanse to pelt into the running hounds. Cross and Tes both opened fire and shot energy beams onto the advancing hounds.

Once closer, Sir Lars Madden jumped up into the backside of a hound as they tried to claw and slash out at Cross who was running about, swiftly dodging and firing his C-20 at the Shadow Hounds. In the power armor, he was faster than usual and managed to dodge and fire repeatedly at them. Sir Lars swept two Psi-Blades, created in the image of two large, two-handed Claymores. Wielding each one-handed with ease, he struck the beast over and over, finally cutting its head off.

Jumping out at another hound, the Knight slashed his way into the beast like a madman. Sending blood and gore in all directions, Sir Madden cut the beast in half, stepping though it to advance on another. One giant beast was weakly attempting to reach out towards Cross but was shot several times by rail gun and Naruni rifle. Tes and Fay concentrated their attacks on another Hound.

A large, clawed paw was parried by Herjaza and cleaved off two of the hound's talons. Bursting into flames, the hound emitted a horrific howl of pain as it burned. Several bursts from Radek and Brad silenced the creature.

When the attack ended, all four dead Shadow Hounds turned into smoke and dissipated.

Cross inspected the rocks laying on either side of the path and said, "Thank goodness. Undisturbed."

Pointing towards the hill in the distance Cross said, "Over that rise. There will be a fallen tower. That's our destination."

The six of them quickly made their way up the hill and to the collapsed stone tower. The only portion of the tower still intact was the base of it. A dark-stained, wooden door stood closed on the face of the stones. Cross grabbed the door lever and looked at the others.

"I don't know what we will find inside. Thank you each for coming. We must kill Volic or he will continue to kill people on Earth. Ready?"

The five each nodded at Cross and Herjaza spoke to Cross, "If they keep Volic's minions occupied, you and I must concentrate on fighting the Godling. I will help you as much as I can Ronan, but you must stab him through the heart."

Stepping quickly into the stone tower ruins, the six spread out in the dim room and took in the scene. Damien and Ares were both already advancing towards the group to engage them in combat. They could see a female chained up, laying at the Demon Lord's feet. Radek reacted first, leaping across the distance to go hand to hand with the white wolf.

Sir Madden bellowed a war cry and ran towards Damien, Psi-Swords held high to attack the risen Psi-Stalker. Damien growled and moved towards the Cyber-Knight.

Tes, Fay and Brad unloaded rounds and shot both energy beams and balls of fire out at the enemies within the throne room.

The others heard Tes yell, "I know what those are! Up by the albino guy. I've been searching for one of those for years in old silos. There are five nuclear bombs up there!"

Cross saw the CS markings on the warheads and knew Tes was right. He wondered how Volic had acquired the bombs.

Herjaza spoke to him, "More horrifying to wonder is what's he going to do with them, Ronan."

Rory stood on the base of the wooden stairs, below Volic and the bone throne. Rory held the detonator in his hand and growled in anger and frustration. They were just about to open the portal to the City of Iron. Ares had held the location in his twisted former Coalition mind. Volic was funneling energy into Rory in preparation for his spell. The damned intruders had arrived right in the middle of his ritual spell.

Rory knew he would have to restart the ritual once the intruders were dealt with. Rory saw his master wave his hand and a wall of hardened mud erupted up out of the ground, separating the intruders from him and the master.

Volic kicked the chained up woman named Gayle down several steps to land on the dirt ground near Rory and cried out, "Kill them!"

Only one of the intruders had managed to bolt across the distance to where Rory stood before being cut off from his comrades. The man wore a power armor suit Rory noticed.

Cross saw that Radek and the others were engaging Damien and Ares. He knew that they were no longer his Coalition buddies from Iron Heart but he dreaded fighting them. Using the enhanced speed ability of the NG Night Reaper power armor, Cross accelerated across the ground towards the Lizard Mage.

Slashing out at the mage with Herjaza, Rory barely managed to leap back and dodge out of the way of the swing. Cross advanced towards Rory who was attempting to mutter out a spoken spell.

Separated from the others, Cross continued fighting the Lizard Mage. Three small balls of magical blue energy leaped out of Rory's open palm and blasted into Cross. Stumbling back from the impact and hearing his armor crack from the damage Cross held Herjaza out towards the Shifter.

As Rory advanced towards him, mouthing another spell, Major Ronan Saint Cross swung the silver sword diagonally through the air. The left arm of Rory was cleaved off. Spinning through the air, the arm landed on the ground and the detonator fell from the motionless hand. Rolling away from both Rory and Cross, the detonator made a beeping sound and came to rest against one of the nuclear warheads.

Screaming in pain the Lizard Man dropped to his knees and grabbed Cross by the neck. Shaking Cross as hard as he could with his right hand, Cross gagged and dropped Herjaza.

As Herjaza clattered to the gravel, coming to rest in the dirt, lightning split out of the sky above them and crashed down

with a defending roar as it struck Rory. Thrown sideways from the impact both Rory and Cross moaned in pain.

Gasping for air, Cross crawled towards the silver sword which had called upon the lightning. Stars burst into his vision as he agonizingly slid across the dusty gravel towards Herjaza, reaching out with his right hand in order to get her.

“Ronan, look out!” Herjaza screamed into his mind. Rory had picked himself up off the ground, chunks of scaled flesh burning and falling to the ground creating little dust storms.

Stumbling towards the human, Rory cried out in both anger and pain from his burns. Pulling a sacrificial knife out of his belt, Rory leaped across the small crater from the lightning blast and pounced onto Cross.

The Night Reaper armor was weakened from the lightning and covered in dirt and bloody scales from Rory. Plunging the vibrating knife down into Cross’s neck, the blade slammed into the stealth power armor’s outside. The cut from the Vibro-Knife didn’t penetrate the armor but the impact slammed Cross downwards. His face plate cracked into the dirt and his vision swam.

Losing consciousness, Cross collapsed to the hard ground and blacked out. Herjaza cried out to him, unheard by both Cross or Rory.

The Lizard Man Shifter wobbly stood up, blood dripping from his arm. The cut had struck him just below his elbow. Stumbling towards the detonator, Rory snatched it up, reading the display. He looked up into the angry eyes of Volic.

Taking one step down the wooden steps, Volic growled, “You have failed me for the last time, Shifter.” Pointing his white, talon-like finger at Rory, Volic unleashed a spell. Rory’s skull cracked and blood seeped from the Lizard Man’s ear holes.

Rory collapsed and dropped the nuclear warhead detonator next to Gayle. She glanced towards the glowing red numbers which counted down from four seconds. She could hear Volic advancing towards her, coming down the rest of the stairs at a run.

Gayle was still breathing raggedly from being kicked in her ribs when she heard a female voice in her head. Startled by the frantic voice, Gayle struggled against the restraints and turned her head to look at the silver sword in amazement.

The words echoed in her mind, “You have three seconds to make contact with me before you are blown to Hell in a nuclear explosion! Move woman! Don’t let the Demon Lord get to me first. Roll your body toward me!”

Chapter Fourteen

Soto yelled, “Hold your fire! Don’t shoot! They aren’t bad guys. Stand down, Bravo Team.”

The six humans who materialized before the members of Spectre Cell were all laying on their backs on the concrete floor, having just popped into the room. Only a seventh person who had just arrived, Radek, was standing. Slowly lowering his rail gun at the floor, he used his free hand to wipe sweat

from his brow and smiled, “Soto. How nice to see you. Where have you been man, you missed all the fun.”

The others all stood up except for a female who was tied up and remained laying on the concrete floor.

Soto quickly stated, “Radek! I wasn’t sure you were alive still! Is Major Cross with you?”

Looking at the people who had popped in with Radek, Soto looked for Cross. Seeing two females, an obvious Cyber-Knight based on his armor, that left two other men. Soto saw one was a black man and then picked out a man wearing an NG Stealth armor with a helmet on. The helmeted man looked unconscious but Soto saw the Rune Sword next to the man and knew it must be Cross.

Radek saw that Soto was about to say something and interrupted the man, “No. Major Cross died. I’d have thought you would have known. Cross was responsible for the Xiticix attack in Chi-Town as it turns out. You know I once heard a saying about: ‘A body of men holding themselves accountable to nobody ought not to be trusted by anybody.’ Cross fooled us all. I met some spec ops guys out of Iron Heart, and we tried to capture the former Major, but the traitorous scum almost killed us. In the end, we killed the Major. Let me introduce you to my team. This is Fay, Brad, Sir Lars, Tesla and my old friend...” Radek turned around to point at Cross. Both Fay and Tes were attending the unconscious man. Tes pulled some kind of electronic device out and held it over Cross and activated it. Several beeping sounds later, a light healing spell was cast on Cross.

Fay and Tesla helped Cross stand up as he shook his head. Major Ronan Saint Cross dusted himself off, looked around at the Wayfarer team with Soto and shakily held out a hand to Soto, “Names Gaius Marius. Used to work with Radek back in the day, in New San Antonio. Good to meet you. Who are you guys, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Soto recognized Cross’s voice as he shook his hand, “Gaius. Any friend of Radek is my friend. I’m not at liberty to say who we are but this is my new team I was assigned to. We came here to track down some stolen nuclear warheads.”

Soto looked at Cross and then turned to face Radek, “We recovered the one.” Pointing at the warhead, Soto continued, “I have Intel that an albino demon lord has the other five. You know anything about that?”

Radek smiled. “Well it’s your lucky day then. I can tell you that the other five nuclear warheads were detonated by me right under said demon lord’s butt. Bye bye demon. Bye bye demon lord’s home.”

Grainger stated, “Are we supposed to take his word for that, Soto?”

Soto moved closer to the SEAL and quietly said, “We, Spectre Cell, are Disavowed and totally top secret, right? Well, Radek is even more secret than us. You, none of you, will ever speak of this encounter with these people. You will let me explain this to Kief who will pass it along up to those in the know.”

Grainger nodded. Soto turned back to face Radek, “Who is the tied up lady?”

Radek shrugged, “Her name is Gayle something. We found her in the demon’s home all tied up.”

Soto nodded, “I’d be pleased to take her off your hands to hand her over to our authorities. She’s the reason the nukes were given to the demon.”

“Now hold on, Sir. If you mean to harm this woman, I must object,” stated Sir Lars.

Soto held up a hand to quiet his men, “Cyber-Knight, I understand your code. I’ve worked with a few Knights in my time. I admire your code and can honestly say I don’t have any intention of killing this woman. I plan on giving her over to be tried fairly. Relax. Same team, Knight.”

Radek nodded, “We need to go then. You take the prisoner and we will be on our way. We have things to do, injuries to tend to and our vehicle to retrieve.”

Stepping closer to Soto, Radek whispered to the man, “Laredo Texas. Case de T. Maybe someday you’ll drop by and say hi. If you do, try to bring the lovely Melissa. I likely won’t be there, but messages can be left for me as I can I check in there. When I do, I will be informed if you left a message. Be safe friend.”

Radek’s Raiders left. Soto motioned for Jack to carry the woman named Gayle. Grainger ordered Owen to shackle Ulric. Soto radioed to Melissa, “Six friendlies are exiting via the sewer tunnel. Hold action. In a few minutes, Bravo Team will be coming out with a new prisoner and one warhead. Tell Zero the other five were detonated and I’ll explain further once we are aboard the DHT.”

“Zero says he copies. You’re all okay?” Melissa inquired.

Soto replied, “Yes. Bravo Team suffered no injuries. On our way out in a moment. Then you and I need a short vacation baby. Maybe a trip to Texas.”

Epilogue(s)

Radek’s Raiders

On the outskirts of Laredo Texas, a grande villa is surrounded by high walls which are protected by well-paid mercenaries. Two D-Bees live within the protected walls, Tygin and Tissa. Although they are well-off non-humans, most of the town is fond of the two, who regularly operate and fund the local food and shelter for the needy.

Funded entirely by the two humanoid octopus-like dimensional beings, the food and shelter services also has a learning center. The man who paid for all this is Radek, their adoptive human (Atlantean) son.

On their way out west to seek employment and adventure, Radek’s Raiders pulled up to the outer gates of the villa.

Parking the Techno-Wizard ATV, Tesla whistled and said, “Damn. This is your house Radek? Nice place.”

Radek laughed and said, “It’s not where I grew up but it’s where my adoptive parents live now. Before we head west I just want to stop by and check in on my parents.”

Fay smiled, “You promised a bath. As long as there is a tub here we can stay as long as you want.”

Sir Lars Madden chuckled and said, “You aren’t the only one who needs a bath in this group.”

Brad poked the Cyber-Knight in the arm with his finger, “You, sir, need a bath. I can’t tell if you or Gaius smells worse at this point. This ATV needs to be fumigated, man.”

Herjaza laughed in Ronan’s mind, “You are kind of ripe, Gaius.”

Ronan smirked, then pointed out the front window of the ATV saying, “That guy is tall. Look at him.”

“That’s Aimon,” said Radek. “He was my best friend growing up. He’s a Titan and also head of security here. I better get down there and let him know who we are. Wait till you meet his wife, she’s a real beauty. Her name is Tammatha.”

Once Radek made his way out of the ATV and greeted Aimon, Fay asked, “Is Radek rich?”

Tes laughed at her sister’s question and Gaius said, “When you steal Coalition gold, the best way to spend it is to build your parents a nice house and start your own Mercenary Company, then head out west with your new best friends.”

Spectre Cell

Capt. Kief stood at the podium. Before him the members of Spectre Cell, his Wayfarer Reprisal Team, sat listening to his briefing.

Finishing up, Kief stated, “Soto, Melissa, John, Owen and Jack, we did well on our last mission. This time out we will be taking along our old friend Ulric again. I don’t need to remind you that having a Spell Caster with us is dicey but we will be tracking some mages back to their home base in another dimension. These mages have been performing hit and run tactics on our fortifications surrounding the St. Louis, Devil’s Archway. A group of RCSG scientists stationed at the arch think they have found a pattern to the attacks. Chi-Town Special Forces are going to deploy and be there for the next attack. Spectre Cell is going to wait on the sidelines and if these attackers fall back through the gateway, then it is mission go for us.”

Soto looked up, smiling and asked, “You going to fly a DHT in after them boss or are we all going in on foot?”

Kief laughed, “I was thinking I’d send you in alone, first, and have you report back to the rest of us before we went in. No, actually I pulled a few strings and we are all going in together”

Kief pushed a button on the podium and a projector displayed a suit of power armor on the wall behind him, “We’ll all be suited up in these juiced-up, modified versions of the NG-X112 Lynx power armor suits.”

The members of Spectre Cell admired the power armor displayed on the wall and Soto said, “That’s mean!”

Kief nodded saying, “We will show our enemies what fear is!”

Iron Heart Special Forces Team Seven

René Soren set the house phone down, hanging it up. Turning around he faced his wife who was sitting at the kitchen table with her arms folded across her chest, looking angry.

René smiled knowing she wasn't really mad. Just disappointed since she knew what he was going to say. He'd only been home a few days and was supposed to be off for a week.

"Hey, I can't help it," René said.

His wife smirked and said, "You'd think, now that you are a Lieutenant Colonel, you could get a desk job. How's that young Lieutenant you have been training ever going to learn if you keep going out with the team? Hmm? Do you have to go right now, René?"

They both heard a vehicle pull up outside.

She smiled and said, "I take that as a yes."

René kissed her and said, "There's a Demon Lord..."

She laughed saying, "There always is. Be safe."

René nodded and headed to the front door where he saw the rest of the members of the Iron Heart Special Forces Team Seven all piled into a transport truck outside waiting for him.

Getting up into the right front passenger seat of the transport truck, René wave at his team in the back seats, "More bad guys need their butts kicked, huh?"

Sergeant Tanner said, "How the CS ever survived without IH7, I'll never know. This creep, Hell Lord Fury, is supposed to be in the area. HQ is deploying five SF teams to go say hello to the bugger. Here's our orders, Sir."

The truck sped towards the hangars where SF kept their gear in Iron Heart as René read the Mission dossier.

Deep Below Chi-Town

Located deep beneath the lowest known level of Chi-Town, Colonel Thaddius Lyboc stood behind a wooden table with several maps spread across its surface.

Across the table stood a man dressed in blue jeans, a black shirt and a leather coat. He was well muscled from many years of military service, only his uncut hair and clothes belied him being active-duty military.

Lyboc looked up at the younger man and asked, "How is your mother doing?"

"Well enough. How is your little pet project, working out? Are things progressing as you planned?"

"Yes. There were some kinks at first but I think we have those worked out now. Things are running smooth enough. In a few years I think we will be ready to enact the next part of our plan. In the meantime the cells of the Wayfarer project will actually pull off some good things for the CS. Everything is falling into place."

"Good," said the younger man. "The Coalition, the Vanguard and the Republicans are doing everything we predicted they would. When the time comes, in a few years, everything should be as we planned."

"You have the data I requested on the Ley Line community that's located below Whykin and above El Dorado?" Asked Lyboc.

The man pulled an envelope out of his pack and tossed it to the Colonel.

"There is a coven located there. It is clearly marked on the map. They are summoning Class IV demons for now, but the nexus will be used soon to allow an actual Demon Lord to

come through. A Demon Locust by the name of Hell Lord Syddon. His subjects and coming army are called *The Scythe of Syddon*. There is talk of a project called a *Hell Pit* that is under construction. It doesn't look like they have gotten very far, but there is a thousand foot wide pit being dug. I lost two of my best Shifters, a Temporal Warrior and four experienced soldiers getting you that information. Don't waste it."

"I'll get Colonel Hunter to send a Wayfarer team to the area to see what can be done."

Thaddius set the package down on the table as the younger man turned to leave the room. Lyboc called out, "I look forward to the day you can use your real name."

The younger man stopped at the door, back to Lyboc, and without looking back, said: "Yes father."

Stepping out of the room and closing the door he quietly muttered. "I look forward to the day you become Emperor, so that I can tear that title out of your bleeding hands and I rule the New American States."

Evil

Ares limped into the dark audience chamber located deep within the system of caves. It was a pocket dimension, not too different than the one Ares had come from. A tall man in armor with the head of a lion stood next to an empty chair. The chair was an ornate throne made of polished brass. Two barely dressed females lay on furs, chained to the throne, passed out with empty glasses of dark red fluid spilled from the tipped over cups.

Looking around, Ares felt uncomfortable. Somewhere in the darkest recesses of his memory he recalled that once he was assigned to assault this place of dark magicks. Now he was here to forge an alliance with the human who ruled these caves.

Standing still in the center of the room, Ares was almost completely healed from the injuries he had sustained. The pain helped mask the memories and he pushed them away, focusing on the lion-headed figure watching him.

The silence of the room was broken as a man walked into view, seemingly materializing out of thin air about 10 feet in front of Ares. The man appeared to be in his late 40s and was dressed as a mage. Brushing his long hair out of his face with his hand, covered in rings, he watched Ares as he strode toward him. Rings which Ares could sense contained magicks of their own, the man radiated vast amounts of magic himself. Stopping before Ares, the man spoke.

"I assume my old traveling companion sent you here. Disincorporate and without a body, I imagine his essence is none too happy. You are lucky Wolf, he will require a living breathing body to inhabit. As it happens, I can provide your master exactly what he requires. I can also perform the necessary ritual to enact the possession. However, if I do this for my old friend, I will require another offering from him. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Ares nodded and recalled the last words of Volic. From across the pocket dimension, he had spoken to Ares in the Wolf's mind. "I cannot leave this dimensional prison. Step

into the portal I have created for you. Go. Escape and offer anything he wants from me in return for his services.”

Ares said, “I was told to tell you my master would agree to any request you had. He must have a body.”

The mage offered a dark smile and said, “I, Alistair Duncon, the true leader and power of the Magic Zone, will ensure your master has what he needs. Come. Walk with me and we will discuss what I want in return.”

Night, December 14th, 120 P.A.

The Unholy Desert, several miles outside the demon occupied city of Rock Ridge, near the base of the Demon Mountains, Wormwood.

“Radek! Wake up, dear,” Herjaza whispered to the Atlantean Juicer.

A groggy Radek fumbled to sit up. Once again, he could feel the chemical burn of the harness kick in, but the usual desired effects of instantly being awake and alert didn’t follow.

The constant 110 degree heat made sweat break out on his forehead. His muscles ached and Radek finally thought, “What’s wrong? Has our Freelancer campsite been located? What is it, Herjaza?”

After a moment of silence, the silver sword spoke in his mind, “I told our mutual friend, Major Ronan Saint Cross, he needed to stab that Godling in the heart. He’s back, hon.”

Adrenaline surged into Radek’s body and he stood up instantly and thought, “about time it kicked in.”

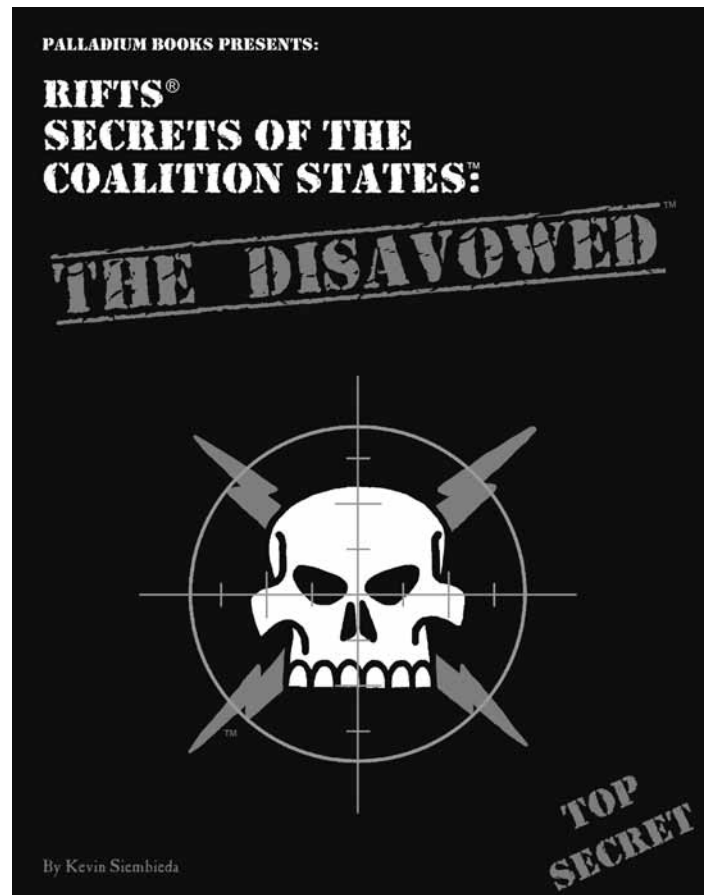
Fully alert now, the Juicer spoke to Herjaza, “Ronan is back?”

“No, Mikkel. As far as I know, Ronan is still working out of Northern Gun with Task Force X, doing what he does best, killing Xiticix. I mean Volic is back. Here. On Wormwood! I can feel his presence and somehow he has escaped from the dimensional prison he was in!”

“That’s not good. I thought he was blown up by nukes ten years ago! What’s he doing on Wormwood?”

Herjaza was slow to respond but finally stated, “I assume he’s coming for us.”

FIN



The Icy Ocean
and
The Great Ice Shelf

Northern Sea

The Island Kingdom of Bizantium and its Colonies



miles 0 50 100 150 200 250
km 0 80 160 240 320 400

- ★ Bizantium Capital
- Bizantium City
- Bizantium Town/Village
- ✠ Wolfen Trading Post
- Ruins

Sea of Despair

Strait of Forlorn Hope

Grand Valley

Orgod's Backbone

Homeland Bay

Shadow

Dragon Claw

Colonies

Homelands

Ogunheim

Seven Sisters

Murdigan

Thronah

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Tohatha

Nendalheim

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Lothed

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Port Lila

Gideon

Burley

Rachant

Letia

Kallico

Bar

Plu

Shetston

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Northomber

Southomber

Vicer

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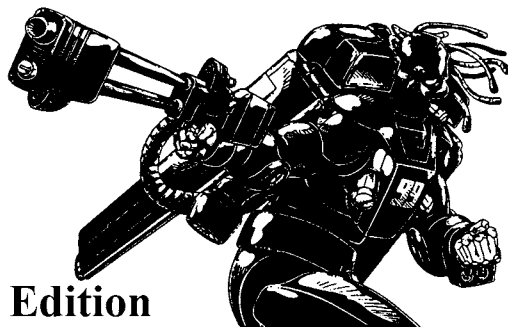
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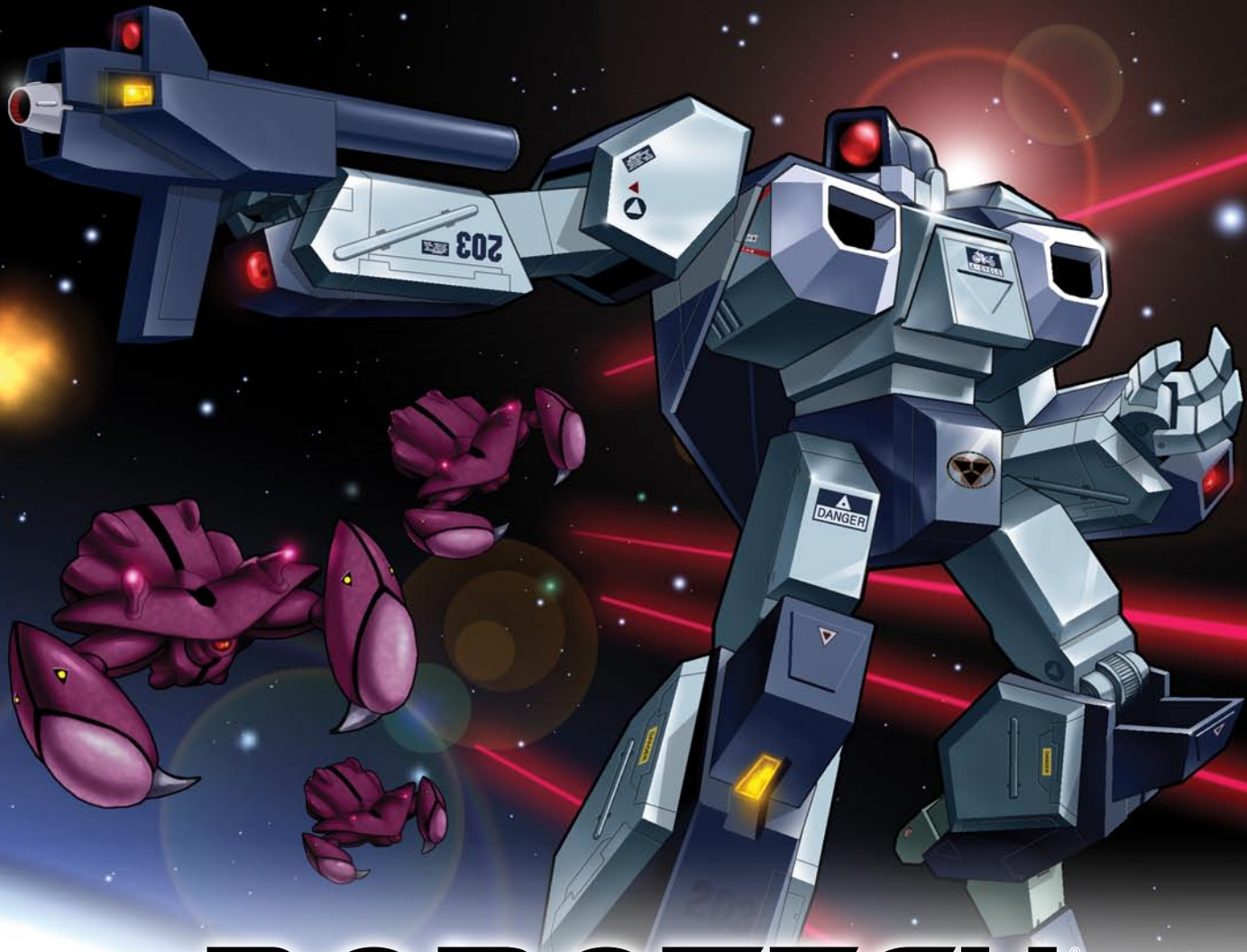
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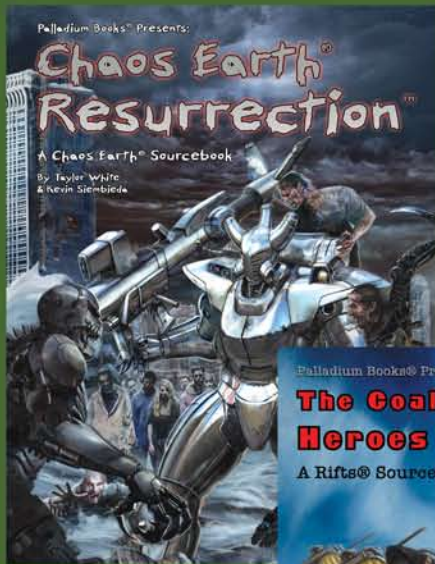
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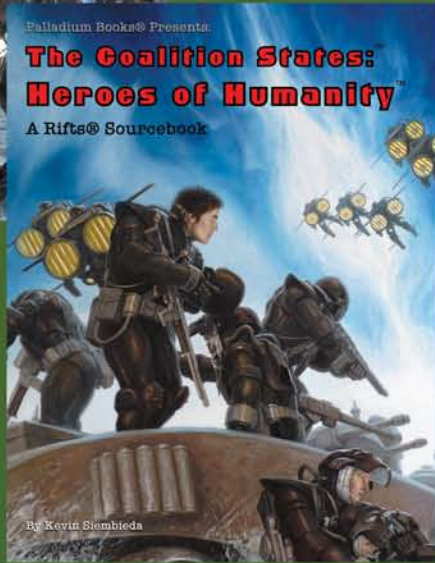


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