

Palladium Books® Presents:

THE

RIFTS®

Your Guide to the Megaverse

Inside . . .

Chaos Earth™ Britain

Palladium Fantasy RPG® Orient

Nightbane® Magical Studies

Heroes Unlimited™ Adventures

Rifts® Mercenary Campaigns

Fiction, Conventions, News & More

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

Some parents may find the violence, magic and supernatural elements of the games inappropriate for young readers/players. We suggest parental discretion.

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The Rifter® Number 27

Your guide to the Palladium Megaverse®!

First Printing – July, 2004

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The Rifter® #27 RPG sourcebook series is published by Palladium Books Inc., 12455 Universal Drive, Taylor, MI 48180. Printed in the USA.

Palladium Books® Presents:

THE RIFTER #27



BRANDT -97

Sourcebook and guide to the Palladium Megaverse®

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Special Thanks to all our contributors, writers and artists – and a special welcome on board to the artists and writers making their debut in this issue. Our apologies to anybody who got accidentally left out or their name misspelled.

Contents – The Rifter® #27 – July, 2004

Page 6 – Art

This beauty is by Drunken Style Studio artist, Chuck Walton, and depicts the Demon Queller from **Rifts® China Two**. The talented people at DSS did an amazing job on the artwork for this book, which is finally at the printers and ships to distributors the end of July (in stores first week of August).

Page 7 – From the Desk of Kevin Siembieda

Crazy times continue at Palladium Books, but it's a good crazy. The boss-man, Kevin Siembieda, talks about what's going on at Palladium Books, the latest with licensing, conventions, Nokia, the future and how we are finally getting back on track with releases – **Rifts® China 2** finally done and at the printers, **Splicers™ RPG** in final production, work progressing with **Beyond the Supernatural 2™**, **Phase World®** and **Three Galaxies™** back in print, and more. We may still be stumbling around and miss a few deadlines, but man oh man do we have some great things in store for our fans.

Page 8 – Palladium News

Rifts® role-playing video game for Nokia's high-tech platform, the **N-Gage QD**, Palladium Books and Nokia share a booth at **Gen Con**, Erick Wujcik is heading back to China, Amber Diceless finds a new home, an **Origins** synopsis, and the latest **Rifts® Movie** news (Kevin meets David Franzoni and Jerry Bruckheimer; see page 12 for the details).

Page 10 – Palladium's Gen Con® Booth

Won't you join us at **Gen Con® Indy**? Palladium will have a nice big booth this year (planning ahead, unlike last year) with special guest creators **Erick Wujcik** (your last chance to meet him and get autographs before he heads off for China for the next two or three years), **Todd Yoho** (writer of **Rifts® Dinosaur Swamp™**) and, of course, **Kevin Siembieda**, **Wayne Smith** and other Palladium staff members as well as **Ramon Perez** and other artists. Plus we are sharing our booth with Nokia, who will be showing an animated trailer for the **Rifts® RPG** for the **N-Gage** and bringing some of their key people. Don't miss out on limited edition T-shirts, prints, portfolios, original artwork, new and out of print books, autographs, chats with creators and fun.

Art by Drunken Style Studio (from **Rifts® China 2**).

Page 12 – Coming Attractions

Palladium is cruising now. **Rifts® China 2** is at the printers (heck, by the time you're reading this, it might be in the stores!). Could **Splicers™ RPG** be the next **Rifts**? **Rifts® Dinosaur Swamp™** is selling like hot cakes. **Phase World®** is back in print after two years (it's about time) and so will be **Three Galaxies™** (Carl Gleba's super-popular **Phase World®** source-book). **Beyond the Supernatural 2™** should be done by August (or Sept.), and **United Worlds of Warlock™** for **Phase World®** and **Rifts® Merctown** are coming soon.

Page 16 – Chaos Earth™

Britain in Chaos

British fan writer Alex Tulloch sets the stage for life in Britain after the Great Cataclysm. Great optional source-material for **Rifts® Chaos Earth™**. Includes an overview of the Cataclysm, a handful of new O.C.C.s and some unique equipment of the SFE.

Artwork by Apollo "the groom to be" Okamura.

Page 29 – Palladium to be at

Trinity Con in October

Trinity Con is a promising young Michigan convention dedicated to gaming, comics and anime. Palladium is throwing in its support by having **Kevin Siembieda** (you know who), **Carmen Bellaire** (**Splicers™** and **Powers Unlimited™**), **Roger Cartier** (long time Palladium pal and G.M.) and others run 3-4 games each, as well as bringing Palladium staff members and the artists of Drunken Style Studio, having a big booth, and being around all weekend to chat with fans, sign books and have fun. If you're in the Michigan area, come on down to join the fun.

Artwork by Drunken Style Studio depicting a robot of the Geo-Front from **Rifts® China 2**.

Page 30 – Rifts®

Running a Character Driven

Mercenary Campaign

Ian Schroen presents an outstanding guide for running a **Rifts® mercenary campaign**. His observations are dead-on and his G.M. tips are very good. Ian is one of the first-timers this issue and we hope to see more of him in the future.

Awe-inspiring artwork by is by Freddie Williams II.

Page 39 – Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing Game®

The Palladium Orient

Greg Diaczyk outdoes himself with this imaginative, comprehensive and fun look at bringing the Orient to the Palladium Fantasy World. Far fetched? Not really. In fact, Kevin Siembieda had the famous **Defilers** visit a parallel dimension where Samurai Trolls dominated the world, complete with Ninja, mystics and dragons. The Asian culture is so rich and lush with evocative images, powers, demons and gods that it is fun to incorporate in almost any setting. Proof reader and writer Julius Rosenstein says this article is worth the price of **The Rifter® #27** all by itself. What do you think? Includes four O.C.C.s, magic weapons and adventure ideas.

Artwork by the venerated master of ink, pencil and paper, Kent Burles.

Page 57 – Nightbane®

The Pros & Cons of Studying Magic

The creative Ed Woodward III is back with a look at handling magic in the Nightbane® world setting. He offers a variety of random tables full of good ideas.

Artwork Ed Woodward III (see, we told you he was creative).

Page 64 – Heroes Unlimited™

The Software Valley War

Todd Yoho presents an optional setting and four adventures for HU2. A corrupt corporation, hired guns, and intrigue await.

Artwork by Allen and Brian Manning.

Page 76 – Heroes Unlimited™

Fallen Angels

K.G. Carlson is the author of this pulse pounding short story that is sure to give Game Masters ideas for their own games. K.G. is another first-time contributor we hope to see more of.

Art by the Brothers Grimm – Allen and Brian Manning.

Page 90 – Heroes Unlimited™ Advertisement

In case, you've forgotten how much fun and just how comprehensive HU2 really is, let us remind you of all the cool books available for it.

Artwork by Brian and Allen Manning.

Page 91 – Rifts® Phase World®

The Hammer of the Forge

Chapter 27 of James M.G. Cannon's ongoing saga. Could the story be winding to an end?

Artwork by Apollo "get me to the church on time" Okamura.

The Theme for Issue 27

This issue's theme is thinking outside the box and expanding your options. The Palladium Megaverse® is truly "limited only by your imagination," and this issue shows just where that imagination can carry you. The idea of bringing the Orient to the *Palladium Fantasy RPG®* article ties in nicely with the release of *Rifts® China One and Two*.

The Cover

This issue's cover is one by Iginio Giordano and is an enlarged section of one of the paintings he did for the defunct *Rifts® Collectible Card Game* by Precedence. We've never met Mr. Giordano but we've admired his artwork and thought this moody illustration was perfect for *Chaos Earth™ Britain*. With a little luck, maybe we'll see a new *Rifts® CCG* in the future.

**Palladium Books® role-playing games ...
infinite possibilities, limited only by your imagination™**

Optional and Unofficial Rules & Source Material

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

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

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

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

www.palladiumbooks.com – Palladium Online

Coming Next Issue

The Rifter® #28

- Material for *Palladium Fantasy®*.
- Material for *Nightbane®* and/or *Heroes Unlimited™*.
- Material for *Beyond the Supernatural™*.
- More material for *Rifts®*.
- The next chapter of *The Hammer of the Forge™*.
- The latest news and developments at Palladium Books.
- Source material for the entire Palladium Megaverse®.
- New contributors and fun. So please join us.

**Palladium's games are found
in stores everywhere**



E. WELTON

From the desk of Kevin Siembieda

Crazy Times

This has been a crazy year and, in the immortal words of Wayne Smith, "Kev, you know it's about to get a whole lot crazier."

Although Palladium's schedule has been shot to hell, we've been working on some pretty exciting projects: **Rifts® China One and Two**, **Splicers™**, **Beyond the Supernatural™**, **Rifts® Dinosaur Swamp™**, **Merctown™**, **Lazlo™** and others.

Palladium has been cultivating and introducing new freelance writers (Todd Yoho, Carl Gleba, Jason Richards, Carmen Bellaire and the return of Patrick Nowak).

We will release two new games (*Splicers™* and *BTS-2*) this year and a dozen sourcebooks.

Palladium is licensing Rifts® for the mass market and trying to plot our future.

I've been flying from one end of the continent to other, attending conventions and running games.

I've met Jerry Bruckheimer and film writer David Franzoni.

I've discussed elements of the Rifts Movie script and other things.

I've been working on *Beyond the Supernatural™* and coordinating and editing everything else.

I've signed a deal with Nokia letting them produce a Rifts RPG video game for their exciting new game platform, the N-Gage QD, and my agent and I have been talking with other companies about other possible licenses.

I've been flown out to Nokia's offices in Vancouver, to E3 in Los Angeles, and gone to Origins. Next month is Gen Con (and October is Trinity Con where I'll be running 3-6 games).

And it's only July!

Steps Toward the Future

The future looks full of promise on many fronts.

Nokia is proving to be a wonderful licensing partner and I already know my experience with them is going to be nothing short of fantastic. They've involved me in every aspect of the video game development, story, promotion and advertising. They make me feel welcomed, wanted and a part of their team. They are working hard to capture the true essence of Rifts® and if their video game (slated for a Summer 2005 release date) isn't truly epic, I will be stunned. Nokia will join us for Gen Con, bringing a life-sized Glitter Boy standee, plasma screen TV, video game trailer and an extra touch of class to the Palladium booth this year.

Hollywood is Hollywood, so the Rifts® Movie remains exciting and fun, but I can't tell you anything about it.

We all expect Carmen Bellaire's *Splicers™* RPG to be Palladium's next big hit. It is a truly fun, different and dynamic science fiction setting with characters villains and ideas that will blow people's minds. The only folks more excited about it than us, are Carmen and the 40 or 50 people he ran *Splicers™* for at Origins.

Beyond the Supernatural Two™ is another game that we all think will surprise, please and enrapture gamers. The closer it gets to completion, the more defined and different the BTS setting becomes. This will be a thinking man's game with an emphasis on role-playing and story that I think gamers will just love. It's hard for me to gauge my own work, but the staff seems to think it too will be a hit that may start out slow (because nobody really knows what to expect), but build and build as word of mouth spreads. I know I'm as excited about it as I am about *Splicers*.

Todd Yoho's first outing with *Rifts® Dinosaur Swamp* was an impressive one. We got a lot of positive feedback on it at Origins and it is selling so well that distribution began to reorder it one week after it shipped. You can count on seeing more of Todd's work in the future, and not just for Rifts®, but *Beyond the Supernatural 2™* as well.

Titles like *Rifts® Merctown™* and *Merc Ops™*, *United Worlds of Warlock™* and *The City of Lazlo™* will continue to develop and explore people, places and aspects of Rifts Earth that will keep that setting fresh and build new excitement.

Rifts® China Two is another book that is finally done and looks awesome. It may have taken Erick Wujcik five or six months to write the damn book, but I think you'll find it was worth the wait. Erick's bold imagination combined with his love and knowledge of China has helped to create a nice, new chapter in the saga that is Rifts Earth.

And while Rifts® has gotten a lot of attention lately, we have NOT forgotten *The Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing Game®, Heroes Unlimited™*, *Nightbane®* or *Chaos Earth™*. I have four books lined up for *Palladium Fantasy®*, three for *Heroes Unlimited™*, two for *Chaos Earth™* and three for *BTS* (which can be used with *Nightbane®*, by the way).

Some Stumbles and Bumbles

With all of these things going on, it is no wonder books have been delayed and rescheduled.

I want to apologize for our schedule being so wrecked this year; worse than usual. Just know that we are working hard to get out most of the titles we've promised for this year and are trying to get things in place that will keep us on schedule in the future (like next year).

In the meanwhile, know that Palladium Books is building a foundation for a bright future. Not just for us, but for our fans. As big as Rifts® has been in the past, I think it will soon hit the stratosphere and go mass market in a huge way. When that happens, I want you to know that my agent and I, and everyone at Palladium, are doing our best to maintain the high quality and integrity of the game you know and love. No quick buck garbage or unsupervised licenses. We want our fans to enjoy the ride of this fantastic journey every bit as much as we are. And though I've said it online, at conventions and in the pages of *The Rifter®*, let me reiterate: I love role-playing games. I have no plans to go Hollywood, or to sell the company. This is where

I'm happy, doing role-playing games and sourcebooks. I might add comic books, art books, more portfolios and novels to the mix, but role-playing will always come first. You see, I still have a zillion stories to tell, and I want to tell them as role-playing games. So I guess you're stuck with me – all of us – for another 20 or 30 years. I hope you don't mind.

– Kevin Siembieda, July 2004

News

By Kevin Siembieda, the guy who should know

Rifts® game for the N-Gage

Palladium Books® is proud to announce the Rifts® pen and paper role-playing game will become a dynamic *video role-playing game* for the Nokia N-Gage™ game deck.

The N-Gage QD game deck, coming to the USA by the end of Summer 2004, is the newest addition to Nokia's handheld game platform. Their slogan is, "Anyone - anywhere." And wait till you see exactly what that means: Bluetooth™ wireless technology, wireless multiplayer gaming, and a slew of games (*Spider-Man 2*, *The Sims: Bustin' Out*, *Pathway to Glory*, *Pocket Kingdom*, *Ashen*, *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004*, and a whole lot more). And the upcoming N-Gage Arena can do . . . well, let's just say it will provide gaming experiences in new and exciting ways.

The Rifts® game for the N-Gage is scheduled for 2005. I've been working closely with Nokia and the game design team. Their work has blown me away and if they keep up this level of quality, this game will be something special. I think part of the magic is that the game designers are fans of Rifts® and are striving to make it the best video RPG possible. I think the story will surprise and please long-time Rifts players and intrigue newcomers.

I'll keep you posted as things develop.

Nokia & Palladium

Together at Gen Con® Indy

– Booth #401 – August 19-22, 2004

The Rifts® game for the N-Gage is scheduled for Summer 2005, but promotion has already begun. Those of you attending Gen Con Indy can swing by *Palladium Booth #401* to catch a glimpse of the computer animated trailer and brief interview with some of the key creative people behind the N-Gage video game project. Then meet, in person, Nokia Producer *Shane Neville*, Creative Director *Trent Ward*, and Nokia PR wizard *Wini Wong*; grab some flyers, win some prizes, and get your photo taken with a seven or eight foot tall standee of a *Glitter Boy*!

As for Palladium Books – *Erick Wujcik*, *Wayne Smith*, *Ramon Perez* and I (*Kevin Siembieda*), along with other Palladium creators and staff, will be at the booth throughout the convention to chat with fans, sign books, and have fun. Of course, the hottest new books, back stock titles, T-shirts, collectibles,

and even some rare, out of print books and original artwork will be offered for sale at the booth. Items with limited production numbers and collector value (like Palladium's out of print John Zeleznik portfolios, limited edition mini-portfolio, Game Master T-shirts, Palladium Crimson and Rifts® Gold hardcover edition) are available only while supplies last, on a first come, first served basis.

We hope to see you there.

Rifts® China 2 is done!

Erick Wujcik headed back to China

By the time you're reading this, Rifts® China 2 should be at the printer's. Erick Wujcik has finished writing his first-ever title for Rifts® and it's a doozy. Awesome martial arts and mystical powers, Chinese dragons (very different from their western counterparts), Enlightened Immortals as player characters, scads of new magic, world information and much, much more.

His timing couldn't be better either, because Erick has accepted a position in Shanghai, China, as Game Design Studio Manager at *UbiSoft China*, a French electronic game company. We'll miss Erick's vibrant personality and buzz of ideas at the Palladium offices, but we are glad he got this exciting offer. Everyone at Palladium wishes him well and we know we'll keep in touch.

Erick Wujcik at Gen Con

– Booth #401 – Palladium Books

Erick Wujcik will be a guest at the Palladium Books booth #401 at Gen Con Indy. This may be your last opportunity to meet and get autographs from him in North America for the next couple of years, so bring your copies of *Ninja Turtles®*, *Ninja & Superspies™*, *Amber Diceless™*, and *Rifts® China* books to be signed while you still can! And if Erick should run any impromptu game sessions at the con, don't miss it.

Amber Diceless goes to Guardians of Order

As many of you may know, Erick Wujcik has been publishing *Amber Diceless Role-Playing* through his own small pub-

lishing company, *Phage Press*, since the early 1990s . . . but not for much longer!

Erick has announced a deal with the well-known RPG publisher, **Guardians of Order (GoO)**, transferring the rights to the ground-breaking diceless game. Since GoO's Prez Mark MacKinnon, and Editor Jesse Scoble, were the original founders of the Ambercon North convention long before they got into the publishing biz, Erick is pretty confident that we'll see Amber Diceless "done right" in a new and improved format, followed by a steady stream of support material.

Oh, and before the rumors start to fly, Palladium Books wasn't interested in **Amber Diceless**, because we felt we could not give the game the full attention and new products that it deserves. We think *Guardians of Order* and *Amber* are a good fit and wish them the best of luck.

For more details, check out the *Phage Press* website, <http://www.phagepress.com>

Origins 2004, a brief synopsis

I think the 2004 Origins Game Expo was fun for all of us at Palladium Books, at least on a personal level.

I, for one, always enjoy chatting with fans, hyping up what's coming from Palladium, and goofing around.

I also enjoyed hanging with the freelance artists and writers, many of whom I only get to see, face to face, once or twice a year. This star-studded Origins saw artists *Apollo Okamura*, *Ramon Perez*, *Brandon Clark*, *Ka Xiong* and *Liz Refuss* at our booth, all of whom offered original art for sale and did character sketches on the cheap (typically \$10-\$20).

Writers included the irrepressible *Carmen Bellaire*, the astonishing *Todd Yoho* and the affable *Carl Gleba*. Long-time friends and sometime contributors to the Palladium Fantasy RPG® line, *Randi* and *Roger Cartier*, were also present to lend a hand, as was *Chris*, Palladium wild man *Carmen Bellaire's* understanding wife, and their daughter, *Robyn* (her first exposure to the crazy world of gaming).

My pal *Doug Lamberson* surprised me by showing up to help work the booth all four days, and of course, Palladium stalwarts, *Wayne Smith* and *Steve Sheiring*, were there to help run the booth. My only regret is that I didn't have more time to enjoy their company more at the convention.

I'm usually spread pretty thin at these shows signing books, selling product and visiting with gamers, friends and fellow manufacturers who swing by the booth. This year I added running two six-hour gaming events. One was a **Palladium Fantasy** game set in the Eastern Territory, and the other was something of a preview and play test for **Beyond the Supernatural 2™**. Both went very well and everyone seemed to have fun. The **BTS-2** game was especially fun and unpredictable. With any luck, **BTS-2** will be out at Gen Con or shortly thereafter. It is definitely something different and could be the surprise hit of the year.

Carmen Bellaire's three or four **Splicers™** games were the talk of the convention, at least around the Palladium Booth, as ecstatic players would run to the booth the next day to thank *Carmen* for a great time and to tell me how "awesome" **Splicers™** is. I heard over and over how it was "fast-paced,

gritty and cutting edge," and how it had the "feel of the old **Mechanoid Invasion®**" and "the excitement of **Rifts®** when it first came out." This praise only confirms my belief that **Splicers™** is going to be Palladium's next hit game. Seriously, don't miss it. **Splicers™** early August.

For some reason, Palladium never seems to sell a ton of product at Origins, though sales were up about 12% compared to last year's. That's okay, because we always have fun with fans and fellow game creators. This Origins we met and made some new friends and had a blast with old ones . . . er, that's "old friends," not Old Ones. the Alien Intelligences, but then you probably knew that already.

For more details and *color photos*, see the *Palladium Origins 2004 Report* on our web site, www.palladiumbooks.com – see the faces of the mutant madmen behind some of your favorite games.

Palladium's next convention appearance is at **Gen Con Indy**, August 19-22, followed by **Trinity Con**, October 1-3, in Southfield, Michigan, and maybe **U-Con** in Ann Arbor, Michigan (depending on my schedule).

Kev's Origins RPG discovery: *Crimson Empire*

I have found that there is often one new game company or RPG that stands out at Origins or Gen Con. This year, for me, that product was **Crimson Empire** from a British company of the same name. I have not had a chance to play or thoroughly read this new game yet, but it sounded cool and looked enticing. Now I'll admit, I could be a victim of subliminal seduction, because the **Crimson Empire** booth was directly across from the Palladium booth and I couldn't help constantly looking at the powerful and evocative artwork on their display. After a day and a half I had to go over and take a closer look. I liked what I saw. In fact, I liked it so much that the **Crimson Empire RPG** became my only game purchase of the show. The product is visually striking and I figured it was worth the fifty bucks for the artwork and author's signature alone. If the story and text is as evocative as the artwork (and from what I've skim-read, it is), then this is a product I thought my fellow gamers might want to take peek at, which is why I'm plugging this product. Too many little gems, like this one, seem to get lost in the sea of D20 products and titles by the big name companies, so I thought I'd throw a little light on this one.

I really enjoyed talking with the people at the **Crimson Empire** booth, too. All seemed knowledgeable, pleasant and energetic and I especially enjoyed chatting with the author and publisher, *Chris Loizou*. He seems like an imaginative game designer and a sharp businessman. I have a hunch, we may be hearing about this gent and his company for years to come.

I'm not going to go on much more about this game because there is an advertisement for it elsewhere in this issue of *The Rifter®*. Check it out for yourselves.

Palladium Books® attends *Gen Con*® Indy

– Booth #401 – August 19-22



The Palladium Books Booth & Guests

Palladium's exhibitor booth is right up front, offering the newest products, tons of back stock product, T-Shirts (new and old, many limited editions), out of print books, limited edition prints and portfolios, original artwork, and special guests available to talk and sign books.

Highlights Include . . .

- Life-sized, seven or eight foot tall *Glitter Boy* standee – great for photo-ops.
- Plasma screen TV showing the E3 video trailer and a brief interview with key creative people behind the *Rifts*® RPG video game for Nokia's N-Gage platform.
- *Kevin Siembieda*, President of Palladium Books and creator of *Rifts*®, *Palladium Fantasy*®, *Heroes Unlimited*™ and other games, will be available throughout the entire convention to sign autographs, chat with fans, and talk about the latest happenings at Palladium Books (hopefully, including movie news he can finally reveal).
- *Erick Wujcik*, author and game designer, whose works includes *Rifts*® *China 1 & 2*, *Ninjas & Superspies*™, *Mystic China*™, *Ninja Turtles*®, *After the Bomb*®, *Amber Diceless*™ and many other game titles, will also be available to talk and sign autographs before he leaves for China. This may be your last chance to meet and get autographs with Erick for the next few years. Don't miss this opportunity.

- *Wayne Smith*, editor of *The Rifter*® and most of Palladium's titles.
- *Steve Sheiring*, the guy who created and played "Lord Coake," and is Palladium's sales manager.
- *Todd Yoho*, author of the upcoming *Rifts*® *Dinosaur Swamp*™ and regular contributor to *The Rifter*® (Friday & Saturday only).
- Artists *Ramon Perez* and *Brandon Clark* from *Drunken Style Studio*, and possibly others. All will have original artwork for sale and be available to sign autographs and chitchat.
- Nokia video game producer, *Shane Neville*, and Creative Director, *Trent Ward*, will also be present to discuss their plans for the *Rifts*® N-Gage video game.
- All the latest releases, including *Splicers*®, *Rifts*® *China 2*, *Phase World*®, and possibly *Beyond the Supernatural 2*™.
- Back stock titles, including out of print issues of *The Rifter*®.
- *Rifts*® *Silver Hardbound* edition and *Heroes Unlimited*™ *Gold Edition*.
- One *Rifts*® *Gold Edition* (collector's item selling for more than \$300 online).
- Rare and out of print books from Kevin Siembieda's personal archives.
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- Limited edition portfolios.
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- Surprises and more.

Palladium convention news and updates can be found on Palladium's website (www.palladiumbooks.com) as well as the pages of *The Rifter*®.

Gen Con® Indy Convention Information:

August 19, 20, 21, & 22 (Thursday thru Sunday)

Indianapolis Convention Center, Indiana, USA

Contact Info: Call (206) 957-3810 for more information and registration.

Or check out the Gen Con website (www.gencon.com)

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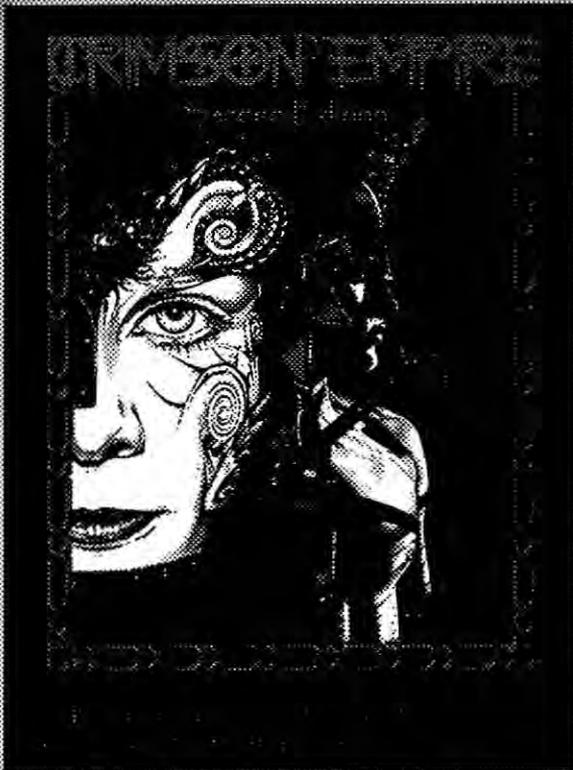
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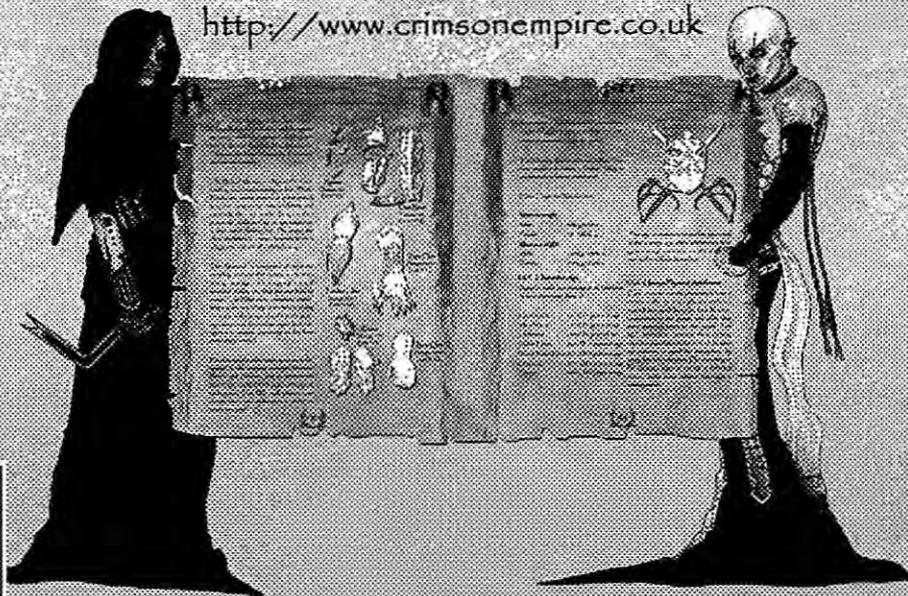
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a SPARTANS UNLEASHED production



Rifts® Movie News

Reprinted from the Palladium website

While I was at E3 in May, I had the opportunity to meet with the gentleman working on the Rifts movie script, film writer **David Franzoni** (*Gladiator*, *Amistad* and *King Arthur*). We chatted at Jerry Bruckheimer Films and discussed a number of different elements for the story. Unfortunately, I'm not at liberty to reveal any of that conversation, but I can tell you that I had a blast talking with David, and it sure seems like he has a good handle on Rifts®. I was delighted that he solicited my input, asked questions and listened to what I had to say. David Franzoni is known for creating strong, compelling characters and writes stories that are more than explosions and special effects, which is exactly what I think the Rifts Movie needs to be more than just another second-rate sci-fi flick.

Life has its funny moments. After the meeting, I got to see the long trailer for King Arthur just before it was to hit the movie theaters, and was walked out of the Bruckheimer offices by David, who assured me we'd be talking again. The meeting went as well as I could have hoped – nice, smooth and productive.

It was a beautiful California afternoon, so I was waiting for my taxi outside and basking in the moment when I realized I was being flagged down to come back inside. Chad Oman met me at the door of his office and motioned for me to walk with him down and around a very short hallway. As we were passing a wall covered in framed movie posters of Bruckheimer films, Chad grinned and said something like, "So Kevin, Jerry just got in from Europe and he wants to meet the man who made him wait so many years to cut a licensing deal for Rifts." Before I could respond to that quip, I found myself standing in front of Jerry Bruckheimer!

"The" Jerry Bruckheimer.

But not only was I standing before the man . . . the legend . . . but there were Oscars and other awards and memorabilia on a table behind him and . . . well . . . my mind turned to mush.

I wasn't quite a blithering idiot, but close to it. We shook hands and small-talked for about ten minutes, me gushing like a fan boy and talking at Mach speed, before we decided the taxi had waited long enough and Chad walked me to the door. I thought it was classy and generous for Jerry to make a point of meeting me, especially since he probably had a million things to do upon his return. Too bad his impression of me is probably that I'm a gibbering monkey.

"Jerry, I wasn't prepared! I'm not a gibbering monkey." Okay, maybe a little bit, but I can't help it, the Monkey is my sign in Chinese astrology. Oh well, nothing I can do about it now. It was very cool to finally meet the soft-spoken Mr. Bruckheimer, and I thought you guys and gals might enjoy hearing about it.

More Licenses for Rifts®

Palladium Books is currently exploring licensing possibilities in a number of different areas for Rifts®. Ultimately, our goal is to find licensing partners who will work with Palladium Books to expand the Palladium Megaverse® into the mass market while maintaining the quality and integrity of its game worlds

that our fans know and love. In short, quality products that remain true to the original role-playing game and please our fan base.

Established companies can contact Palladium's agent: Mark Freedman at Surge Licensing, 6851 Jericho Turnpike, Suite 225, Syosset, NY 11791.

Companies interested in foreign language publishing rights to Rifts®, or in licensing other Palladium RPG intellectual properties, can contact Palladium Books directly at 12445 Universal Drive, Taylor, MI 48180.

Rifts® Limited Edition

Hardcover Silvers are sold out!

The Rifts® Silvers are sold out. Palladium Books has held on to approximately 190 copies to sell at conventions (including *Gen Con* and *Trinity Con*) and to dole out at special events and in the next X-Mas Grab Bag or two. Other than that, they are gone! Hope you serious collectors got your copies while you had the chance. Word has it the price for these black beauties is already jumping above the \$50 mark.

What can we say? *Rifts®* remains hot and is only going to get hotter, especially with new books like Rifts® China 1 & 2, *Dinosaur Swamp™*, *Merctown™*, *Lazlo™* and others.

Coming Attractions

Coming July and August 2004

Palladium Books is working hard to get its schedule back on track and release the many hotly anticipated new role-playing games and sourcebooks our fans are clamoring for. As far as we know, Palladium Books is the only role-playing company releasing two new games in 2004, and we think you will find that both were well worth the wait.

The Rifter® #27 is in your hands right now!

Phase World® is back in print and should have shipped the same day as *The Rifter® #27*, in July.

Rifts® China Two is in final production and should ship to distributors around *July 30* and be in stores by August 6th.

Splicers™ RPG, Palladium's new science fiction game, is also in the final stages of production and should ship to distributors around August 13. Compatible with *Rifts®*.

For Phase World® – Rifts® Dimension Book 6: Three Galaxies™ will be back in print as of August 6.

With a little luck, **Beyond the Supernatural 2™** should ship at the end of August. If not, it will ship in September.

Rifts® Dimension Book 9: United Worlds of Warlock™ for the **Phase World®** setting will ship in September.

Reprints Galore! *Rifts® Dimension Book 2: Phase World® – Three Galaxies™* for **Phase World®** – *Palladium Fantasy RPG®* – *Rifts® Federation of Magic* – all back in print by mid-August, with more to follow.

Summer & Fall 2004 Schedule

Available now

Rifts® World Book 26: Dinosaur Swamp™ – \$17.95 retail – 160 pages.

July, 2004

July 23 – **Phase World®** is *back in print* after two years. A long time fan favorite that should sell like new. Cat. No. 816 – \$22.95 retail – 208 pages. This date is definite.

July 30 – **Rifts® China Two: Heroes of the Celestial Court** – \$17.95 – 160 pages. In the final stages of production right now.

August, 2004

August 6 – **For Phase World® – Rifts® Dimension Book 6: Three Galaxies™** – one of the most popular sourcebooks in the *Phase World®* series is back in print after being out of stock for 8 months. A fan favorite. Cat. no. 851 – \$17.95 – 160 pages. This date is definite.

August 13 – **Splicers™ Role-Playing Game** – 192 or 224 pages with a cost of \$22.95 or \$24.95 depending on the final page count. There is a lot of buzz around this game. In the final stages of production.

August 13 – **Palladium Fantasy Role-Playing Game®** *back in print* after a short two month absence – Cat. No. 450. – \$26.95 – 352 pages. This is definite.

End of August or Early September – **Beyond the Supernatural™ RPG, 2nd Edition** – \$22.95 – 192 pages.

September, 2004

If **Beyond the Supernatural™ RPG, 2nd Edition** does not ship in August it will be a September release, so vows Kevin Siembieda – \$22.95 – 192 pages.

September 15 – **Rifts® Dimension Book 9: United Worlds of Warlock™** (for **Phase World®**) – \$17.95 – 160 pages.

And probably one or two more favorite sourcebooks back in print.

October, 2004

The Rifter® #28 – Halloween Special – \$9.95 – 128 pages.

Rifts® Mercenaries Two: Merctown™ – \$17.95 – 160 pages. Tentative.

Also Scheduled for 2004 Release:

Beyond the Supernatural™: Tome Grotesque – 96 or 144 pages; \$13.95 or \$15.95 depending on the final page count.

Beyond the Supernatural™: Arcanum Sourcebook – \$17.95 – 160 pages.

Rifts® Merc Ops™ (formerly *Rifts® Mercenaries 3: Weapons & Gear*) – \$17.95 – 160 pages.

Rifts® Chaos Earth™: NEMA™ Mission Book One (tentative) – \$10.95 – 64 pages.



Splicers™ RPG

Could it be the next Rifts®?

That's what at least 30 fans proclaimed after playing **Splicers™** with the creator at **Origins**. These gamers told me **Splicers™** was a twisted and fun combination of *The Mechanoids®* and *Rifts®* in a new, gritty, cutting-edge setting. They insisted it would be our next big hit and vowed to buy a copy as soon as it hit the shelves. I must confess I haven't seen excitement for a new game like this since *Rifts®*, and I concur – **Splicers™** is something special.

Splicers™ is jam-packed with wonderful and bizarre concepts, characters and villains. The heroes are simultaneously brave and horrific, often sacrificing a piece of their own humanity to save the human race. The setting is both familiar and bizarre. The overlaying theme: an epic battle between man and machine that is full of twists, turns, irony and surprises.

If you don't take a look at this game when it comes out, you'll be missing out on a twisted journey into a whole new

world of adventure that will knock your socks off. We wouldn't be surprised if the first printing sold out in a matter of weeks. Really.

Splicers™ is a new, hard-edged and gritty science fiction role-playing game set on a high-tech world where diabolical robots and machines rule, and human beings are vermin to be hunted and exterminated. The human struggle is complicated by a *nanobot plague* that instantly turns metal objects touched by human flesh into killing machines. Consequently, humans have been forced to turn to organic technology to battle the world-dominating machines as they fight to reclaim their planet.

- Human character classes that are strange, tragic and heroic all rolled into one. They include the Archangel, Biotic, Dreadguard, Outrider, Packmaster, Roughneck, Saint, Scarecrow, Skinjob and Tinman.
- The humans' genetically "grown" power armor and weaponry that changes and improves with age and experience.
- The insane machine mind that rules from on high and commands legions of deadly robots – Sewer Crawlers, Cable Snakes, Necroborgs, Necrobots, Ratbombs, Assault Walkers, Battle Tracks, and others.
- The nanobot plague and its ramifications.
- Secret cities, strange environments, weird weapons and unique equipment.
- History, world background and epic adventures that are gritty and action packed.
- A new, stand-alone role-playing game heavy on science fiction.
- Mega-Damage system – compatible with **Rifts®**, **Chaos Earth™**, and **Phase World®**.
- Written by Carmen Bellaire with additional text and rules by Kevin Siembieda.
- Cover by Mark Evans. Interior art by Drunken Style Studio.
- \$22.95 – 192 pages (price might increase if final page count grows). Cat. No. 200.
- Date of release: August 13, 2004. In final production.

Rifts® World Book 26:

Dinosaur Swamp™

Dinosaur Swamp™ shipped to distributors June 22, and should have begun hitting stores by June 28. We have plenty in stock, so don't believe it when a store tells you they aren't available. Then again, they are selling like hot cakes, with several of Palladium's distributors placing reorders just one and two short weeks after it shipped. Yep, everyone loves dinosaurs.

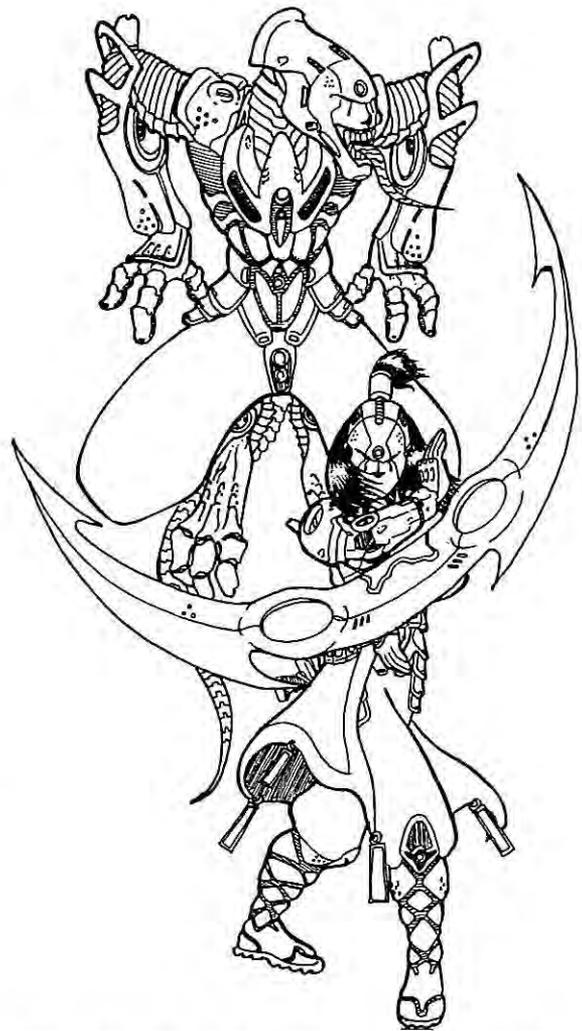
- \$17.95 retail – 160 pages. In stores now!

Rifts® World Book 25:

China 2: Heroes of the Celestial Court

At last, Erick Wujcik is done with the writing and the book is going into final production.

Rifts® China Two presents the heroes and renegades who oppose the Yama Kings, fight for humanity and hide among the



sacred mountains and meadows of China. Oriental monks, Demon Quellers, Soothsayers, martial arts masters, strange new types of magic, and more. This one has it all!

- Oriental dragons unlike anything you've seen before.
- The involvement of the Celestial Court.
- Heroes, avatars of the gods, and superhumans.
- Martial artist and heroic O.C.C.s.
- Martial arts and mystic powers!
- Secret monasteries where the Demon Quellers and other champions are trained.
- The soldiers and technology of the Geo-Front.
- More background and settings for Rifts China.
- Written by Erick Wujcik.
- Cover by John Zeleznik. Interior art by Drunken Style Studio.
- \$17.95 – 160 pages. Cat. No. 858. Available end of July.

Phase World® is back!

Rifts® Dimension Book 2 – July

After being out of print for two years, this long-time fan favorite is back! This one has everything and the kitchen sink. A must for anyone playing in the Phase World® setting.

- 19 O.C.C.s, including the Cosmo-Knight, Galactic Tracer, Spacer, CAF soldiers, Space Wulfen, Imperial Security Agent and many more.

- 15 R.C.C.s, including the Prometheans, True Naruni, Naruni Repo-Bot, Kreegor, Noro, Dominators and others.
- Rules for creating alien races.
- Phase Technology, weapons and Phase Fields.
- Psionic Crystal Technology.
- Weapons, robots, power armor, tanks and spaceships.
- Phase World and the trans-dimensional city know as Center.
- Overview of the Three Galaxies, the Consortium of Civilized Worlds, Transgalactic Empire, United Worlds of Warlock, and other places.
- Phase World campaign ideas and character sheets.
- Written by C.J. Carella.
- Cover by Kevin Long. Art by Long, Martin and others.
- \$22.95 – 208 pages. Cat. No. 816. Available end of July.

Three Galaxies™ is back!

Rifts® Dimension Book Six – August

The fans have been begging us to reprint Carl Gleba's space epic since the first print run sold out in less than a year. Well here it is, a guide to the Three Galaxies. Dozens of solar systems and individual planets, notable alien races, people and monsters, as well as space anomalies, spaceships and more.

Discover the Hunter System, where giant semi-intelligent serpents and other monsters are stalked for sport. Explore worlds hidden inside nebulas, and defy the murderous Necrols. Their living weapons and organic starships.

- An overview of the Three Galaxies and some of the prominent people and places in them.
- 16 O.C.C.s/R.C.C.s. And a half dozen monsters.
- More on the Intruders, Kreeghor, Splugorth and others.
- The deadly Demon Stars and Necrol living spaceships.
- The legendary Demon Planet – world killing behemoth the size of a planet itself.
- Space Station creation rules and new spacecraft.
- Adventure hooks and ideas throughout the Three Galaxies.
- Written by Carl Gleba.
- Cover by John Zeleznik. Art by Okamura, Burles and Drunken Style Studio.
- \$17.95 – 160 pages. Cat. No. 851. Available early August.

Phase World® Dimension Book 9:

United Worlds of Warlock (New)

One more corner of the Three Galaxies is explored, as the key worlds, notable people, places, magic, hubs, gods and cults of the UWW are presented for the first time ever.

- Key planets, moons, people and cultures in the United Worlds of Warlock.
- New O.C.C.s, including the Astral Elves, Shadow Psychics, Knights of the Covenant, Void Rangers, and others.
- New weapons, equipment, rune weapons and magic items.
- Church of the Anvil, dark covens and cults.
- New types of magic.
- Adventure ideas galore.

- Written by Daniel Bishop with additional material by Kevin Siembieda.
- Cover by John Zeleznik. Interior art by Drunken Style Studio and others.
- \$17.95 – 160 pages. Due for a September release.

Rifts® Merctown™

Have you always wanted to have a fully fleshed out town to visit where adventurers and mercenaries are welcomed and their every need is catered to? Then welcome to *Merctown*, a city built by mercenaries, for mercenaries.

- Key people and places.
- Shady establishments, the Black Market and guns for hire.
- People and places mercenaries can hire themselves out to.
- NPCs, villains and adventure ideas galore.
- Written by Patrick Nowak with additional material by Kevin Siembieda and Carmen Bellaire.
- Cover by Mark Evans.
- \$17.95 – 160 pages. Cat. No. 863. October 2004 (tentative).

Beyond the Supernatural 2™ will be something exciting and new

Beyond the Supernatural Two™ builds on the bones of the classic BTS game to create a modern world of horror and magic unlike any before it.

The supernatural is real. Psychic abilities and the paranormal are real. Magic is real. Yet science and authority figures dismiss them as hysteria, hoaxes and madness. However, special individuals gifted with *special abilities* or cursed with *firsthand encounters* find themselves inexorably linked to the paranormal and forced to deal with the consequences.

Some of our heroes are gung-ho psychics and sorcerers who see themselves as humankind's hidden protectors. Others are drawn into the realm of shadows through quirks of fate, or fueled by feelings of revenge. Still others are reluctant heroes and even victims, but all have been touched, in some way, by forces beyond human comprehension – **Beyond the Supernatural**.

BTS-2 is really coming together and will surprise some people with its depth of character, background and new direction.

- A contemporary horror setting that makes sense and challenges the players.
- New P.C.C.s include the *Firewalker*, *Night Hunter*, *Psychic Medium*, *Diviner*, *Autistic Psychic Savant*, *ordinary people* and others, all with new and unique abilities.
- Many of the characters, psychic abilities and magical powers are unlike any Palladium Books has presented before. Characters and powers that will challenge players and bring a new level of strategy and role-playing to the surface.
- Even familiar characters like the *Psychic Sensitive*, *Healer*, *Nega-Psychic* and others are more evolved and unique.
- Character background and the world setting is bold, clear and sinister.
- I.S.P. and P.P.E. interact with the characters and the supernatural in new ways.

- The secrets of the supernatural, ESP, and magic are revealed.
- Victor Lazlo and his lasting legacy: The Lazlo Agency is described.
- The world background serves as a guide to adventure.
- Interior Art by Ramon Perez, Michael Dubisch, Freddie Williams, Apollo Okamura and others. Cover by John Zeleznik.
- \$22.95 – 192 pages (price may increase if page count is expanded). Cat. No. 700
- August or September 2004 release.



BRITAIN IN CHAOS

Optional Source Material for Rifts® Chaos Earth™

By Alex Tulloch

Britain, December 16, 2098 A.D.

Despite their power and influence in some areas, the Britain of 2098 is a declining world power. Tradition is keeping them on the world stage, but they are hanging on the coattails of the true super powers. Still, life for the average man or woman is as good here as anywhere else in the world. The future, if not glorious, is at least bright.

If there is one place in the world that is best prepared for the Great Cataclysm, it is Britain. And yet it is also the place that perhaps faces more danger than any other. Because of a confusing psychic warning, they will know a few days in advance that

something is coming, but they can not possibly imagine the extraordinary catastrophe approaching.

Britain has changed a lot in the past one hundred years. Devolution has created an autonomous Scotland, and Ireland has reunited, and both are now republics, divorced from the English monarchy. England and Wales remain united, but are no longer the world power they once were. Life in Golden Age Britain is very similar to that described in *The Rifter*® #17, with the following notable aspects.

Scotland

Scotland has flourished best under these new conditions. No longer dominated by England, it has attracted great investment, offering several unique features. With vast acres of space untouched before the Golden Age, Scottish cities have expanded

phenomenally, though it still has huge areas where companies seeking solitude have been established. Scotland also offers power, with vast wind farms and hydroelectric powerplants giving Scotland tremendous renewable energy sources. Enviably tax benefits mean the land north of the border has become the home of several genetic research companies, a German arms factory, and the Aberdeen Arcology, a community of the future enclosing an entire city and all it might require within a single building. Despite its capital still being in tradition-bound Edinburgh, Scotland has become the forward-looking innovator of the British Isles.

Ireland

Ireland finally reunited its two halves when the United Kingdom officially ended in 2064, but at the same time, the Irish Republic has strengthened its ties to the mainland. Fortunately, the growing economic power of Scotland has prevented English dominance of Ireland, and this compromise seems to work for most parties. Ireland's primary industry has become tourism, marketing itself as the last unspoiled country in the world. All modern development has been kept to the east coast, the all-encompassing Dublin city now indistinguishable from the frenetic life elsewhere in the world. Rural Ireland remains its quiet, slow-paced self. Only the tourists interrupt the quiet daily routine. Some Irish citizens complain they have sold out their culture, their future and their land, but Ireland remains a contented and relaxing place, walking to a different pace from all other lands.

England and Wales

England and Wales together are a land with its best years behind it. It remains a significant force in world politics, but only because of its historical links to several other super powers, the NAA (both the US and Canada), Germany and the rest of the European Union, Japan, and India. Its industrial power has been in decline since the 1980s, and the majority of factories are foreign owned. The traditional landed wealthy have found their resources drying up. Even the monarchy has had to put up with more and more countries declaring themselves republics. Australia was inevitable, but Scotland's decision in 2064 was a tragic loss. On the plus side, London remains a banking and trading center, and England continues to be one of the dominant forces in bio-engineering.

The Armed Forces and the SFE

Despite the devolution, some aspects of British life are still conducted as a unit. Some economic decisions are made to benefit the Isles as a whole, and environmental policy is a joint decision. The United Armed Forces are also drawn from all the nations. Britain's military remains one of the best, a small but elite force, man-for-man capable of taking on any other in the world. It has even acquired a small force of American, German and Japanese powered armor suits, though there are no British-owned robotics factories. Most of the armed forces, however, rely on traditional vehicles for full-scale engagements, particularly tanks, helicopters and jets. The RAF (Royal or Republic Air Force, depending upon country) has been experi-

menting with minimal Juicer enhancements to aid flying skills, but for the most part the British have not been too enamored with human augmentation. This traditionalist army has made hardware and skill its priority, rather than numbers.

For low-intensity warfare, the Special Forces Executive has been established. The SFE oversees the members of all the traditional elite British regiments (the SAS, the SBS, the Royal Marines, the Paras, and the Gurkhas, to name a few) in anti-terrorist and special operations behind enemy lines. There are similarities between many of the operations these units deal with, but it is the SFE's task to spot the differences and select the right men for the job. (Members of the SFE are likely to be among the most common O.C.C.s for British Chaos Earth characters.)

Psychic Research

There has been heavy united government investment in investigating psychic phenomena, unsurprising considering Britain is one of the few places in the world where true psychic phenomena occur in any significant amount. While many in America and other parts of the world only believe in psychic phenomena when caused by the MOM process or other technological means, British researchers have uncovered a strong case for localized genetic change. Their hypothesis is that certain places, which seem to be plentiful in the British Isles, have some kind of energy that can create natural psychics over several generations. Some have pointed towards a twentieth century researcher by the name of Lazlo, but few see a real connection.

The practical side of the research has moved into two areas: machines and devices that rely upon specially-trained psychics (see **Rifts® World Book 3: England**, page 106), and bio-engineering low level psychic powers into "ordinary" people. The machines are useful but require psychics of great strength, which means only a few hundred of the millions in Britain can operate them. Most devices are designed to work only with particular operators. This prevents them from being used by those without enough inner strength to use them safely (as well as ensuring security, being useless without its user).

British genetic research has discovered a method of splicing psionics potential into embryos, though the results from this are less than encouraging. Despite splicing genetic codes from their strongest psychics, the results vary tremendously in power. Links between psionics, the body and the rest of the genetic code remain the best theory as to this, though some point to locality as a cause. The only consistent powers are Telepathy (though sometimes only with other telepaths) and Clairvoyance.

All this research is only a few decades old and is currently being kept a closely guarded secret controlled by the British secret service. (Even NEMA, a close ally, only knows that they are researching in this area. They know nothing of their successes.) The department in control of this research is DI9 (Department of Intelligence Nine), originally a laughing stock, looking into supposed supernatural events and alien abductions. Now DI9 operatives are loaned to other intelligence units, and operate at home and abroad.

Strong natural psychics are trained in using psionic devices, and often weapon systems. The most common nickname for these operatives amongst the intelligence community is "Com-

bat Spooks.” Genetically-modified psychics are most often put to use as clairvoyants, gathering information unavailable to regular sources. This is the Psionic Collective. Their predictions have so far prevented three industrial accidents, four terrorist attacks, and one assassination attempt.

December 17, 2098 A.D.

The Collective, the psychic oracles of DI9, all awake from a nightmare simultaneously. Though the details vary, all the dreams seem to be of the same event, a weapon of unknown origin that creates blue fire, being used on Britain. DI9 goes on high alert and begins looking for a weapon that matches the visions. Nothing that fits the bill can be found in any archive. They also analyze where the blue fire will strike. Many of the Collective are unable to pinpoint locations, but some are capable of identifying places. Contacting the military, DI9 begins evacuations of important people from certain sites (including Stonehenge, Bath, York and Derby). Regular military forces are moved into the suspect areas, although not too close.

For the next few days, the Collective continue to receive worrying visions, whilst the military make subtle preparations for some kind of attack. With the country on high alert, the British Isles feel they are as well prepared as they could possibly be.

They are wrong.

December 22, 2098 A.D.

At three minutes past four, a pillar of blue fire erupts five miles skywards at Stonehenge, Maes Howe and Newgrange. Lines of blue fire, a mile or two shorter than the pillars, race outwards from the three sites. Lines seem to erupt from nowhere, unconnected to any others. Although not midnight in Britain, it is still dark. The blue fire lights up the night all the way along the western side of the mainland, bright enough to read by. Ireland is almost completely covered. Most people within fifty miles are woken by the eruption of light, some with a wailing sound in their heads. Electrical devices all over the country stop, with only specially hardened systems staying intact. Communication nets splinter. It is as if huge chunks of the fiber-optic cables have vanished.

Half of the Collective wake up screaming. The other half will never wake.

It takes hours for reports to come in. The south coast has vanished, and tsunamis racing across the Atlantic and up the Channel swamp the land, destroying the cities of Plymouth, Bournemouth, Southampton, Portsmouth, Brighton, Folkestone and Dover. Similar waves hit the relatively unpopulated west coast of Ireland, and up the Irish Sea, wiping out Bristol, Cardiff, Swansea and parts of Dublin. The city of Liverpool is not hit by the monster wave. It vanishes from the face of the Earth in a blaze of blue fire before the wave hits, its millions of souls vanishing into nothingness with it.

It is not the only one.

York, Worcester, and Edinburgh all appear to have vanished as if they never existed. Many smaller communities are gone as well. Buildings, residents, pets, trees and roads are all missing, with no explanation, other than the blue fire, which hit them all.

London, with only a few lines of blue fire, should be about the safest place to be, but cracks are appearing in the Thames Flood Barrier and unnatural flows are colliding with it hourly. On the streets, an unnatural fog that refuses to vanish is a cause for concern. Most Londoners stay indoors and wait for news.

Amidst all this, the ravings about a dragon in Scotland and monsters in Luton are ignored. There are more important matters.

The winds hit in mid-morning, with hurricane force from the southwest. Again, the east coast is spared the worst. In other places the winds send trees and buildings crashing to the ground. The blue fires seem unaffected by the wind. However, each collapsing skyscraper seems to send pulses of blue fire rocketing skywards.

DI9 and the SFE, trying to gather information, are shocked to learn that most of the regular armed forces and many of their own best Combat Spooks and soldiers are amongst the missing and the dead. Their efforts to be ready for the disaster placed some of their best troops in the firing line. As the sea level continues to rise, it starts to roll over the flat lands of East Anglia. The remaining military bases there are ordered to abandon their positions and fall back to higher ground.

December 24, 2098 A.D.

Christmas Eve

The casualties in Manchester, Glasgow and Birmingham mount up. Pulses in the blue fire are the only warning as parts of these cities disappear, too. Military observers record the event, but few explanations can be raised. The description of one SFE observer, who wrote that the city seemed to warp into the distance, gave the phenomenon its most common name, a Dimension Quake (or D-Quake). The first flakes of volcanic ash begin to fall in the southwest. The prevailing winds keep Britain safe from more than the tiniest drifts of ash from European volcanoes but here, as elsewhere, the sky is grey and the sun hard to see.

DI9 operatives are talking of a marked improvement in both range and power of their psychic abilities. Some have gained telekinetic powers that outstrip all previously seen levels, while telepaths are capable of frighteningly strong mental probes and attacks. The Combat Spooks find their weaponry even easier to operate.

Reports begin to come of large numbers of deaths in Bloomsbury in the center of London. Considering the rioting, pillaging and general lawlessness of the past few days, a few more deaths seem to be nothing new. What makes these strange is that the few bodies found appear to have been clawed to death by creatures unknown. Reports of monsters and the walking dead are prevalent. A single unit of SFE troops are sent to investigate.

December 25, 2098 A.D.

Christmas Day

Derby joins the list of missing cities. Leeds is swept by apparently random fires that soon become too numerous to put out.

Mass evacuations begin. The last radio message from the BBC is broadcast. In a joint message, the King and the Prime Minister appeal for calm and respect for the law, and assure people that order will be restored soon. Few people hear the message. Even fewer believe it. The first refugees arrive outside the almost untouched Aberdeen Arcology. All are given a Christmas meal, but the Arcology authorities know more will come, and their generosity will only be able to go so far.

Snow falls in Scotland and Northern England. It is grey and full of ash.

In London, the Thames Flood Barrier breaks and the river rises dramatically. Armed forces and emergency services are overwhelmed as they oversee the evacuation. Large refugee camps are established at Croydon and Purley to the south, and Potter's Bar and Enfield to the north. With the English government ousted from its bases of operations, Scotland's capital whisked to some other dimension, and Ireland's capital hit hard on the first day of the Cataclysm, nobody is left in charge.

A falling flash of light in Wales is seen as some kind of omen by the cold, confused Welsh. It will be a fortnight before the first case of smallpox will be correctly diagnosed. The satellite weapon will depopulate most of the principality before eventually dying out. Whose weapon it was, and whether its deployment was accidental or a last spiteful, deliberate act, is unknown. The cold and starvation prevent much traveling, which keeps the disease mostly contained. The exceptions are a few fishermen who try to outrun the plague by fleeing to Ireland. Unfortunately, they take the disease with them.

December 27, 2098 A.D.

The evacuation of London is continued, with thousands still trapped on rooftops as police and army semi-rigid boats patrol the streets looking for more survivors. The gale force winds crossing the country make each trip a risk. Many boats enter the flooded city but do not return. Of those that do return, many of the rescued talk of people walking under the water, and floating bodies that return to life when rescued. Hysteria and stress are blamed for this.

The first people to arrive from Ireland dock in England. They talk of fire, earth tremors and floods. The ever-present blue fire covers eighty percent of the island. Talk of shadowy monsters is rife, as are tales of "wee folk."

The Aberdeen Arcology closes its doors and declares itself unwilling to take in any more people. A few hours later, the first person caught trying to enter illegally is publicly shot. Despite this, more people arrive, demanding to be allowed in.

December 31, 2098 A.D.

New Year's Eve

In London, the police and the army see the beginnings of the flood water receding, although it will be weeks before the general public are allowed to return. They continue to pull stranded people to safety, or pull the dead from the water. Few are found in either condition nearer the central part of the old capital.

A pack of vicious black dogs of large size race through the streets of Dublin. They kill hundreds before vanishing in an area surrounded by the blue fire.

A mass charge at the gates of the Aberdeen Arcology by starving refugees results in the city's only suit of USA G-10 power armor opening fire to halt it. The Boom Gun kills over three hundred before the crowd retreats in panic. The city is labeled as murderous, but the rulers believe they are only doing what is necessary to survive.

January 1, 2099 A.D.

A New Year

The first troops return to London for good. DI9 operatives also return to their headquarters. The return is little more than symbolic, an attempt to persuade people that with the new year things will return to normal.

Despite having the best warning of any land, the British Isles have been shattered. Only three major sites of civilization are left standing at Dublin, London and Aberdeen. Each has its own problems. Dublin stands on the edge of one of the most awesome dimensional hot spots on the planet. London is going to take months to recover from the flooding, and may suffer from it for years to come. Aberdeen is surrounded by crowds demanding that one of the only cities that will have enough food (thanks to its advanced hydroponics bays), feed everyone. Outside of these three cities life is looking bleak. The ashen snow looks set to stay. People are cold, hungry, tired and afraid. It will take a miracle for most of them to survive this coming year, let alone rebuild any kind of civilization.

Through the grey snow, on the site of what will become the village of Old Sarum, a sprig of green can be seen. A new tree has begun to grow.

Geography of the Isles

Sarum, Southern England

The Sarum Tree appears to have begun growing from the day of the Cataclysm. It will take two years for the tree to reach its full height (a feat no botanist would believe). Other trees will begin growing at a later date. In this time, the tree is at its most vulnerable. Therefore, it will begin to make a call for friends.

Good psychics will begin to see the sprouting tree in their dreams, and start to feel drawn towards Sarum without really knowing the reason why. Once there, many will begin to care for the growing Millennium Tree and help it survive its first weak years, giving their P.P.E. freely to help it grow. In return, the tree will give what it can to help its protectors, though few gifts can be given as it needs to concentrate upon growing.

As creatures begin to emerge from the Rifts, demonic forces will realize what is growing at Sarum, and many will try to destroy it. In the end, many people will give their lives to protect the Sarum Tree, but the future generations will thank them as the benefits of the tree become apparent.

Ayr, Western Scotland

Ayr, in Scotland, was the site of the Triax operation in Britain. The people of Ayr were devastated by the water sweeping in from the Atlantic. Few survived, and they are clinging on to life with little thought to the high-tech treasure trove on their doorsteps. However, it will not be long before somebody's eyes turn to this otherwise remote and insignificant location. Who finds it, and what they intend to do with it, is up to the G.M. The inventory should be drawn from the range of Triax machines.

The Southwest of England

A few survivors of the wind and waves that crashed on the southwest coast begin to head northeast. Perhaps irrationally, they cannot believe that all the land is like this. As they travel onwards, more people join the column as it winds its way towards London. Will they reach it? What will stand in their way? How will they find enough food to survive? How will locals respond to hundreds of people turning up on their doorstep? There are lots of adventure ideas here.

Dublin, Eastern Ireland

As the fishermen from Wales arrive, they bring the smallpox epidemic with them. They have had contact with many and spread the disease before it becomes apparent what it is. The already overworked authorities begin trying to quarantine any who show the disease, but it is too little, too late. As more people arrive from the ravaged countryside, they are turned back before they can be infected. There are not enough vaccinations, and Dublin is doomed to die before the decade is out.

More black hounds add to the confusion. They ravage the inhabitants, attacking only small groups, and only if they outnumber them two to one. Ordinary weaponry is ineffective. Only military (M.D.) weapons seem effective. The dogs seem particularly keen to target medical teams. It is almost as if a malevolent intelligence is directing their efforts. (For stats on the Hell Hounds, see *Rifts® Conversion Book 1*.)

London, Southeastern England

As the troops begin to return to London, they begin to suffer from attacks in the central portion of the city. The bodies of London's millions of dead are awaking and attacking the living. The dead's lack of any need for air makes them better suited for the flooded town. It will be a long time before the authorities discover the source of the soulless army and its general, Khefrem.

Khefrem's plan is to take over London. Street by street, the city will fall to him. The ordinary populace will begin to move back in as soon as the flood water recedes, but will be pulled out just as quickly by the SFE when the true threat of Khefrem becomes apparent. What makes the crisis worse is that every victim becomes a recruit for the dark army. All central government



which might otherwise be possible is paralyzed by this crisis in the city's heart, a crisis England brought upon itself by its own colonial past.

Khefrem

A dark stain of the earliest and least understood period of Egyptian history, Khefrem was one of the first priests of Set to blight the kingdom. He was sold into slavery to a hidden temple as an infant, and grew up in an atmosphere of death and suffering. His savage spirit raised him from slavery to initiation. His planned brutality took him to the head of his order. His cunning brought him to political preeminence.

He soon became a power behind the throne of the pharaoh, an ever-present symbol at court of the death cult's power. It was a dark time that spanned a decade until three warriors, champions of Horus, wrecked all his plans in one fell swoop and one gave him a mortal wound. The cult retreated to their most secure temple, and performed a dark ritual that would keep at least some of his life force in his corpse. Unfortunately for him, the spell was ancient, first written before the Atlantean catastrophe. With the power of the ley lines gone, his body was alive but immobile. He would be a helpless prisoner in his own body for over six thousand years. His followers, believing they had failed, sealed his body within a sarcophagus in a tomb in the desert. The grateful people, knowing only that he was gone, obliterated all mention of his name. He was forgotten, removed from history.

In 1899, tomb hunters found his resting place and alerted a nearby archaeologist. An elderly English Lord financed the excavation and after a substantial donation, Khefrem was removed and returned to England. The body was placed in the British Museum and laid out with the scores of other mummies. It stayed there for the best part of two-hundred years before the ley lines roared with power again. Enough power to bring Khefrem back...

Alignment: Diabolic.

Attributes: I.Q. 22, M.E. 20, M.A. 15, P.S. 45, P.P. 16, P.E. 22, P.B. 7, Spd. 20.

Height: Five feet, five inches (1.6 m).

M.D.C.: 2000

Horror Factor: 14

Experience Level: 7th level Necromancer.

Natural Abilities: Undead being that will exist indefinitely.

Night vision (range: 2000 feet/610 m, can see in total darkness), regenerates 2D6x10 M.D.C. every minute (4 melee rounds), takes half-damage from all non-magical weapons except those that are fire based (including plasma weapons), can attempt to animate 7D6 dead per day at a cost of 30 P.P.E. per corpse. For Khefrem's army, use the stats of the mummy from the Create Mummy ritual.

Khefrem spends his first few days after the Cataclysm doing nothing but creating servants. He can use the P.P.E. of the ley line running through the British Museum to increase the rate of reanimation, as well as use all the sacred (and P.P.E. charged) item he finds in the Museum.

Skills: Ancient Egyptian, and ancient versions of most other Middle Eastern languages (all at 98%), Dance 76%, Wilderness Survival 76%, Astronomy 81%, W.P. Knife, Sword and Blunt. Others as you see appropriate.

Combat: Hand to Hand: Basic, 6 attacks per melee, +2 to strike, +3 to parry, +4 to dodge, +3 to save vs psychic attack, +7 to

save vs magic, +9 to save vs Horror Factor, +4 to save vs poison, +2 to pull/roll with punch, fall or impact.

Damage: 1D6x10+30 S.D.C. on a restrained punch, 6D6 M.D. on a full strength punch, or 2D4x10 on a power punch (counts as two melee attacks).

Magic: Knows all spells available to the Necromancer of levels 1 through 7, plus Death Strike, Sickness, Minor Curse, Shadows of Death, Shadows of Doom, Protection: Simple, Strength of the Dead, Summon Insect Swarm, Control/Enslave Entity, Create Mummy, Create Zombie, Sanctum, Restoration, and Transformation.

P.P.E.: 1200

Psionic Powers: Knows all Sensitive powers plus Bio-Manipulation, Mentally Possess Others, Mind Block Auto-Defense, Mind Bolt, and Mind Wipe. Master psionic.

I.S.P.: 200

Vulnerabilities: Fire. Even S.D.C. fire will do its equivalent in Mega-Damage to it. M.D. fire will do double damage. Magic or psionic fire will do triple damage.

The Aberdeen Arcology, Northeastern Scotland

The Aberdeen Arcology was to be the city of the future. Designed entirely by multi-generational Artificial Intelligences, everything in the Arcology was planned to perfection. In the normal run of things the Arcology would have lasted for centuries, the first of a whole series of future metropolises. Its lifespan will be cut short dramatically by the events of 22 December, 2098.

The first crisis is the water. Being on the east coast of Scotland, the Arcology is not hit by the tsunamis, but the rising sea level does lead to the Arcology being left upon an island. Its power is, fortunately, not solar based, because there was little in the way of gloriously sunny days in Aberdeen even before the Cataclysm. Its wind farms are having mixed success, though. The propellers and turbines are, for the most part, working fine in the increased winds, but some are buckling under the pressure and collapsing. Also, being located ten miles from the Arcology itself, they are a weak spot in the Arcology's defenses.

Its second crisis is its reputation. Before the crisis, it attracted many of its residents by claiming to be totally self-sufficient. "Come the apocalypse," they claimed, "we'll still be here." Many survivors of the Cataclysm remember that, remember the documentaries about the great hydroponics bays and the Eden-like indoor gardens. And they pack up what they have and head for Aberdeen. From Britain's most southerly point, it is only two days by car, but the majority are forced to travel on foot and must take days to reach anywhere.

There is only a little sunlight, but it is enough for the Arcology roof gardens. All the hydroponics need is water, and with these the inhabitants have enough food.

But only just enough.

This is what is panicking the mayor and the local council. Their system is designed to cope with its 300,000 inhabitants (third-generation arcologies were planned to be capable of supporting millions), but no more than that. After the Cataclysm,

they have room for perhaps another five hundred, but they have no way of picking those five hundred and explaining to the remainder why they are being left out. So they have chosen to lock their doors and admit no one. They have a small number of security guards, and even a few pieces of military M.D. weaponry, but not enough to hold off a serious attack from a large military force. But even a single warrior in M.D. armor can hold off a starving crowd of scared, ordinary citizens, especially if it is their single USA G-10 suit.

Aberdeen sets up an interesting moral dilemma for players. Many will sympathize with the crowds that congregate around the Arcology, pleading for food and shelter. Those inside are seen as inhuman monsters who are laughing at the pitiful wretches outside as they sip another champagne. This belief could hardly be further from the truth. Most inside would love to help, but the authorities have shown them the fragments of footage the television channels showed before they cut out altogether. They know this is the big one, and it will not be over in just a few days. They also know the limits of what the Arcology can provide. Most will, with heavy hearts, turn their backs on the world and do what they can to survive. And there is a certain ethical and moral rightness to their position, keeping some alive as opposed to all slowly starving. But it is a hard decision to live with. Psychiatrists in Aberdeen will deal with thousands of cases of survivor guilt in the years to come.

Organizations

The SFE

With the disappearance of 90% of the regular army, the Special Forces Executive has become the controlling force of the British military establishment. Sadly, they are faced with a situation they cannot control or cope with. Organizing disaster relief is impossible when everywhere is a disaster. You can only try and deal with what is right in front of you. Unfortunately, what is right in front of SFE Command are a city of plague and a city of the damned.

Of course, there are many SFE soldiers caught far from their main bases in London, Dublin and missing Edinburgh. Many will try to make their way back to their HQ. Others will just find their hands full where they are, keeping people alive, providing organization and leadership to a scared populace. With all that has happened, people find a strong presence, one trained to survive, very reassuring. It is these SFE troops which make good prospects for Chaos Earth campaigns in Britain.

The SFE in Dublin was virtually destroyed by the tsunami. In London it is headed by General Mark Boucher-Jones, English upper class and full of the confidence and arrogance one associates with such an upbringing. Outwardly, he talks of dealing with the situation and bringing Britain back to normal within a decade. With the passing days he grows less confident of this being possible, but still he maintains his upbeat exterior. He is a handsome 50 year old (looks at least a decade younger) with short, grey hair. He has maintained a strong physical build and is capable of holding his own in any fight (10th Level SFE Commando/Para). He is aided by the commanding officers of all

the elite units. Under normal circumstances, this group would be advising the Chief of the Defense Staff and the Service Chiefs (the British equivalents of the American Joint Chiefs) on how to best utilize the special forces. Now, with the odd situation of the special forces outnumbering the regular troops, with so many regulars placed in harm's way when the Cataclysm struck, the SFE head has become more powerful, with only the Chief of the Defense Staff outranking him.

Boucher-Jones' authority is sadly limited to the London area. With the ley lines and ash clouds preventing effective communication, those outside this area are having to work in a fairly autonomous manner. The chain of command is usually respected, but in the outer regions the highest ranks are usually only junior officers. Many are finding the burden of command weighing heavily upon them. Adding to their woes is the limited military force at their command, which leaves them incapable of effecting the real change they wish for. All they can do is try to stop things from getting worse.

The SFE Commando O.C.C.

The Special Forces Executive is made up of some of the best troops on the planet. It covers troops from the army, air force and navy, all expert in surgical strikes and anti-terrorist operations. They are trained for seek and destroy, sabotage, rescue and reconnaissance missions. Now they find themselves thrust into the role of heroes, protecting innocents from natural and supernatural forces.

Also known as Paras, SAS, Royal Marines, etc.

Alignment: Any, but tend towards Scrupulous, Unprincipled and Aberrant.

Attribute Requirements: I.Q. 10, M.E. 10, P.S. 12, P.P. 14, P.E. 12.

Psionics: Same as for American Chaos Earth™ characters.

O.C.C. Skills:

Math: Basic (+20%)

Radio: Basic (+15%)

Radio: Scramblers (+10%)

Language: English and two of choice (+20%).

Land Navigation (+5%)

Intelligence (+10%)

Parachuting (+20%)

Pilot: One of choice (+10%)

Recognize Weapon Quality (+12%)

Wilderness Survival (+10%)

Climbing (+10%)

Running

W.P. Energy Pistol

W.P. Energy Rifle

W.P.: Two of choice.

Hand to Hand: Commando; this skill cannot be changed.

O.C.C. Related Skills: Select a unit to belong to, and take the appropriate skills and bonuses for that unit.

Parachute Regiment: Camouflage (+10%), +5% to Wilderness Survival, Land Navigation and Radio: Scramblers, +15% to Parachuting, and one additional W.P. of choice.



Royal Marines/Special Boat Squadron: Swimming (+15%), S.C.U.B.A. (+15%), Underwater Demolition (+10%), Pilot: Water Scooters (+10%), and one additional W.P. of choice.

Gurkhas: Language: Nepali (98% proficiency), Detect Ambush (+15%), Tracking (+15%), Hunting, +15% to Wilderness Survival and Land Navigation, and one additional W.P. of choice.

Special Air Service: Electronic Countermeasures (+15%), Demolition (+10%), Sniper, +5% to Climbing (including rappelling), Land Navigation, Wilderness Survival and all Languages, and +1D4 to P.E.

Two other skills can also be selected from any of the available categories at levels two, five, nine and twelve.

Communications: Any (+10%).

Domestic: Any.

Electrical: Basic only (+5%).

Espionage: Any (+15%).

Mechanical: Automotive, Basic Mechanics, or Locksmith only.

Medical: First Aid only (+10%).

Military: Any (+10%).

Physical: Any.

Pilot: Any (+5%).

Pilot Related: Any (+5%).

Rogue: Any (+4%).

Science: Any.

Technical: Any (+5%; +10% to Language skills).

W.P.: Any.

Wilderness: Any (+5%).

Secondary Skills: The character gets two Secondary Skills at levels one, four, seven, and ten (normal restrictions apply).

Standard Equipment: Lancelot body armor, energy rifle and energy sidearm of choice (from the list below or any American or German models listed in other *Rifts*® or *Chaos Earth*™ books), 4 extra E-Clips for each, four explosive grenades, two smoke grenades, two flares, survival knife, distancing binoculars, Robot Medical Kit, pocket computer, utility belt, air filter & gas mask, walkie-talkie, uniform, dress uniform, combat boots, and canteen. Paras and SBS/Marines receive an additional S.D.C. handgun, SAS receive a combat knife and a Vibro-Knife, and Gurkhas get their traditional Kukri knife (treat as a short sword). Other equipment may be available with the Game Master's permission, if it fits their mission and skills. Optics, ammo and explosives are the most likely extras. Remember, it may be hard for the players to get reloads during the apocalypse.

Vehicle: Game Masters may decide whether to let the Commandos start with any vehicles as fits their campaign. If they do, they can choose any conventional military vehicle of choice (motorcycles, hovercycles, and jeeps being the most common).

Cybernetics: 55% of SBS/Marines receive underwater Bio-System eyes, and 22% of all other units are fitted with thermo-imager eyes. 12% of all units can choose 1D3 cybernetic implants of choice, including those listed in the *Rifts*® RPG book as black market specialities, with the exception of Cyber-Disguise Type AA-1.

DI9

Department of Intelligence Nine was created in the mid-twentieth century to investigate the possibility of extra-terrestrial life. While they found little evidence of little green men from Mars, some operatives became convinced of the truth in many British legends and supernatural events. They recruited like-minded individuals and convinced the government to keep the funding flowing, even if only a pittance. Then in 2041, an assassination attempt on the Prime Minister was foiled by DI9 agents acting on information given by a self-styled clairvoyant. The absolute accuracy of this otherwise unknowable information attracted the attention of the other intelligence agencies who, under the circumstances, were finally prepared to put aside their skepticism.

Some skepticism returned, however, when the clairvoyant failed to reproduce any kind of accurate results. They missed the fact that his vision had come in his home in Avebury at midnight on the Summer Solstice. But more finance meant more successes were discovered, weak telepathy, minor clairvoyance and in 2067, they found their first telekinetic. Some investigators went after more bizarre ideas, claiming to have found the Holy Grail and Caladwylch, the original name of Excalibur. But the original eccentrics were becoming the exception. More and more experts were brought in to apply scientific method to the study of psionics. DI9 became a support organization to its older brothers, MI5 and MI6, assisting them both at home and abroad. And finally, in 2079, they found the psychic gene.

They have created one hundred and ninety-four psychics since then, now ranging in age from a few months to eighteen years old. All are psychic sensitives, very similar in powers, without the variety found in the latent psychics DI9 has found. On the other hand, they have been trained from childhood to control their powers, and this Psionic Collective can be an information gathering resource of unparalleled power. The last twenty years have also created a corps of psychic agents, utilizing psionically-powered gear as weapons and other useful pieces of equipment. While the Collective was based in London, the Combat Spooks, as they were known, operated out of Edinburgh. The Collective was a passive intelligence gathering unit, while the Spooks were a more aggressive option. There were only 519 trained Spooks when the Cataclysm occurred, and three-hundred of them died or vanished with the rest of Edinburgh.

As with the SFE, only in London are DI9 operatives in any position to work with the authorities to try and restore order. Their main base of operations is Vauxhall Cross, the building that, in 2002, was the HQ of MI6 (and is shown as such in the Pierce Brosnan *Bond* films, if you wish to describe it to your players). Although it was one of the first buildings caught in the flood, everyone was successfully evacuated, the vaults where the experimental technology was kept were waterproof, and the only casualties proved to be a group of genetically modified lab rats. DI9 have now allied themselves with the SFE, seeing them as the best hope for restoring order.

The current head of DI9 in England is Elizabeth Farnham, a strong-willed 60 year old with the spirit and attitude of a far younger lady. She has fought her way to the top through sheer effort, being both the wrong class and sex to truly fit into the

English establishment. Her charming personality, however, made her not only a top field agent (equivalent of a 12th level Operative Agent; see *Ninjas & Superspies™*), but enabled her to work through Whitehall politics to her current position. Although not as outwardly confident as Boucher-Jones of the inevitable nature of success, she is convinced that some form of civilization is possible to rebuild. Unlike Boucher-Jones, she is interested in possibly building up a new style of society, rather than just recreating the past.

The Psionic Collective O.C.C.

Also known as Geneworked, Guinea Pigs.

Alignment: Any, but tend towards Scrupulous and Unprincipled.

Attribute Requirements: M.E. 12.

Psionics: Receives four Sensitive powers at level one. Picks up one more at every level, except 4, 8, 11, and 15 where a Physical or Healing psionic power is chosen instead. The psychic can choose to take a Super Psionic power at these levels instead, but loses their Sensitive choice at the next level. Initial I.S.P. is equal to Mental Endurance (M.E.) x2, plus 1D6x10. Before the Cataclysm, they did not have the 1D6x10. May add 10 I.S.P. per each level of experience. Considered a master psionic. Their choice of powers is more limited than the naturally produced Spooks, but is also less erratic.

O.C.C. Skills:

Math: Basic (+20%)

Radio: Basic (+10%)

Surveillance Systems (+5%)

Language: English and one of choice (+20%).

Intelligence (+10%)

Pilot: One of choice (+10%).

Tai Chi (see below)

Computer Operation (+10%)

W.P.: Two of choice.

Hand to Hand: Basic. Can be changed to Hand to Hand: Expert for one O.C.C. Related Skill, or Hand to Hand: Martial Arts (or Assassin if evil) for two skills.

O.C.C. Related Skills: Select 7 other skills. Plus select two additional skills at levels three, six, nine and twelve.

Communications: Any (+10%).

Domestic: Any (+5%).

Electrical: Basic only (+5%).

Espionage: Any (+15%).

Mechanical: Automotive, Basic Mechanics, or Locksmith only.

Medical: First Aid only (+10%).

Military: Any (+5%).

Physical: Any.

Pilot: Any (+5%).

Pilot Related: Any (+5%).

Rogue: Any.

Science: Any.



Technical: Any (+5%; +10% to Language skills).

W.P.: Any.

Wilderness: None.

Secondary Skills: The character gets four Secondary Skills at level one, plus one more at levels four, seven, and ten (normal restrictions apply).

Standard Equipment: M.D. fabric suit for combat situations (24 M.D.), energy sidearm of choice (from list below or any American or German models listed in other **Rifts®** or **Chaos Earth™** books), 2 extra E-Clips for each, pocket computer, and walkie-talkie. Other equipment may be available with the Game Master's permission, if it fits their mission and skills. Optics, ammo and explosives are the most likely extras. Remember, it may be hard for the players to get reloads during the apocalypse. Despite being intelligence operatives, the Collective are not often deployed in the field.

Vehicle: Game Masters may decide whether to let the Collective Agent start with any vehicles as fits their campaign. If they do, they can choose any conventional civilian vehicle of choice (motorcycles, hovercycles, and cars being the most common).

Cybernetics: None. Would consider Bio-System prosthetics in a medical emergency.

The Combat Spook O.C.C.

Also known as Psi-Spy, Gadgeteers, Bond's Babies.

Alignment: Any, but tend towards Scrupulous, Unprincipled and Aberrant.

Attribute Requirements: I.Q. 10, M.E. 12, P.E. 12.

Psionics: Receives three powers at level one, picked from any of the categories except Super Psionics. Roll on the following table at levels 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14 and make selections as indicated; repeats of the same categories are okay and appropriate.

01-20 One Super Psionic power.

21-30 Two Sensitive Psionic powers.

31-40 Three Sensitive Psionic powers.

41-60 Two Physical Psionic powers.

61-70 Three Physical Psionic powers.

71-80 Two Healing Psionic powers.

81-00 Choice of two powers from any of the three lesser categories, or one Super Psionic power.

Initial I.S.P. is equal to Mental Endurance (M.E.) x2, plus 2D4x10. Before the Cataclysm, they did not have the 2D4x10. May add 10 I.S.P. per each level of experience. Considered a master psionic. Their choice of powers is less focused than the artificially created Collective, but is also more powerful.

O.C.C. Skills:

Math: Basic (+20%)

Radio: Basic (+15%)

Radio: Scramblers (+10%)

Language: English and two of choice (+20%).

Intelligence (+15%)

Pilot: One of choice (+10%).

Recognize Weapon Quality (+5%)

Wilderness Survival (+5%)

Climbing (+10%)

Running

Tai Chi (See below)

W.P. Energy Pistol

W.P.: Two of choice.

Hand to Hand: Martial Arts; this skill cannot be changed.

O.C.C. Related Skills: Select 6 other skills from any of the available categories. Plus two more at levels two, four, seven and eleven.

Communications: Any (+10%).

Domestic: Any.

Electrical: Basic only (+5%).

Espionage: Any (+15%).

Mechanical: Automotive, Basic Mechanics, or Locksmith only.

Medical: First Aid only (+10%).

Military: Any (+10%).

Physical: Any.

Pilot: Any (+5%).

Pilot Related: Any (+5%).

Rogue: Any (+4%).

Science: Any.

Technical: Any +5% (+10% to Language skills).

W.P.: Any.

Wilderness: Any (+5%).

Secondary Skills: The character gets two Secondary Skills at levels one, four, seven, and ten (normal restrictions apply).

Standard Equipment: M.D. fabric suit for light combat situations (24 M.D.), Lancelot body armor for more lethal firefights, Psi-Tech weapon of choice, 4 extra E-Clips for each, survival knife, distancing binoculars, pocket computer, air filter & gas mask, and walkie-talkie. Also receives two Psi-Tech gadgets of choice. Other equipment may be available with the Game Master's permission, if it fits their mission and skills. Optics, ammo and explosives are the most likely extras. Remember, it may be hard for the players to get reloads during the apocalypse.

Vehicle: Game Masters may decide whether to let the Spooks start with any vehicles as fits their campaign. If they do, they can choose any conventional civilian vehicle of choice (motorcycles, hovercycles, and cars being the most common).

Cybernetics: None. Would consider Bio-System prosthetics in a medical emergency.

Tai Chi

Based upon the skill presented by Ben Lucas in *The Rifter*® #7.

Most psychics in DI9 have adopted Tai Chi as their daily exercise routine, finding the background hum from their Telepathy dims slightly when so much attention is devoted to precise movements of their own body. This Physical skill provides the following bonuses.

Add 1D6 to I.S.P.

Add +2 to Maintain Balance.

Add +1 to Grabbing/Throwing techniques.

Add +1 to Roll.

Add +1 to M.E.

“Base, Common and Popular”

Most people who are caught up in the Cataclysm are not heroic soldiers or superspy psychics. But for all that, they can prove interesting characters to play. After all, many films and TV programs show ordinary people thrust into extraordinary situations. Add to that the fact some ordinary people are going to find new talents and psychic powers they never knew they had, and you have an intriguing campaign setup. To create the ordinary man or woman on the street is easy enough. Simply create a character using the *Heroes Unlimited*™ rules, replacing *Step 3: Determining Super Abilities* with a roll on the Random Psionics Table on page 12 of the *Rifts*® RPG. And there you have it, a journalist, policeman or laborer trying to survive in a world gone mad.

Equipment

Most American equipment will be commonly available, as will German and other European technology. Any items from any *Chaos Earth*™ books may be taken with the G.M.'s approval. Britain's gun control laws have remained fairly strict, and none of this technology is allowed for sale to civilians. G.M.s may make this equipment available to characters in *Rifts*® campaigns, but only in the British Isles, and only in small amounts. Remember, the chances of any psychics being able to use any Psi-Tech are about one in ten million (even less if their ancestors were not British).

Lancelot Body Armor

This light armor is commonly used by the Special Forces, providing a good mix of protection and mobility. It consists of a fully padded body suit with a helmet, and does count as full environmental armor (see *Rifts*® RPG, page 209). It commonly comes in green, grey, white and tan camouflage, depending upon the environment they expect to be in.

Class: SDS-40 Lancelot Body Armor.

Weight: 12 lbs (5.4 kg).

Mobility: Excellent; -5% on the performance of Prowl and other Physical skills such as Gymnastics.

M.D.C. by Location:

Head/Helmet — 45

Arms — 32 each

Legs — 45 each

Main Body — 50

Special Weapon Systems or Features: None.

Galahad Body Armor

The regular full environmental body armor of the British Army is a heavier version of the Lancelot, with extra solid plates over the more flexible undersuit. Both suits bear similarities to various US and German designs, with just enough differences to avoid legal problems. Special Forces tend to shun the Galahad, finding it too noisy and bulky for covert operations, but occasionally suit up for straight firefights.

Class: SDS-42 Galahad Body Armor.

Weight: 24 lbs (10.8 kg).

Mobility: Fair Mobility: -15% on the performance of Prowl and other Physical skills such as Gymnastics.

M.D.C. by Location:

Head/Helmet — 70

Arms — 55 each

Legs — 70 each

Main Body — 90

Special Weapon Systems or Features: None.



BA-54 Terrier Ion Pistol

The Special Forces have adopted ion weaponry as their arms of choice. They find that in the dense terrain they most often fight through, the lack of range is no penalty, and the superior punch gives them an advantage.

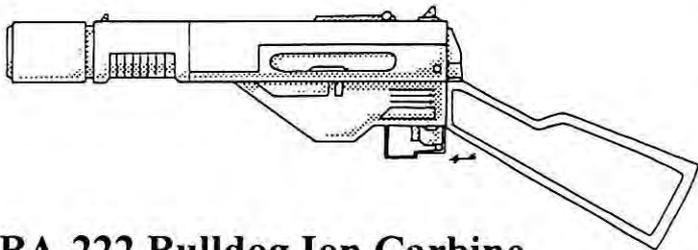
Weight: 3 lbs (1.35 kg).

Mega-Damage: Two settings: 6D6 S.D.C. and 3D6 M.D. per single shot.

Rate of Fire: Standard.

Maximum Effective Range: 800 feet (244 m).

Payload: 10 shots with a short E-Clip, 20 shots with a long E-Clip.



BA-222 Bulldog Ion Carbine

The Bulldog is a short weapon, only about the length of a submachine-gun, but bulkier and firing a thumping blast of energy. It lacks a rapid-fire capability which turns many off, but its adherents point to its devastating blast and intimidating looks. Indeed, it is a fearsome brute of a weapon, especially when staring down the barrel of one aimed at you.

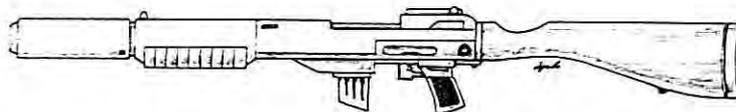
Weight: 8 lbs (3.6 kg).

Mega-Damage: 6D6 M.D. per single shot.

Rate of Fire: Single shots only, maximum of three per round.

Maximum Effective Range: 1200 feet (366 m).

Payload: 20 shots with a short E-Clip, 30 shots with a long E-Clip.



BA-285 Pit Bull Ion Rifle

This ion assault rifle was the standard assault rifle of the Special Forces, designed to offer a maximum number of shots and maximum damage per shot. Range is shorter than for most laser weapons, but for most missions the Special Forces undertake, this is not such a great concern.

Weight: 7 lbs (3.2 kg).

Mega-Damage: 3D6 M.D. per single shot, or 1D6x10 M.D. per burst (three simultaneous shots).

Rate of Fire: Standard.

Maximum Effective Range: 2000 feet (610 m).

Payload: 30 shots with a short E-Clip, 55 shots with a long E-Clip.

Psi-Tech

The psychic technology of DI9's Quartermaster Division is a new and experimental arsenal that has only been in use for about fifteen years. All Psi-Tech is custom designed to work for DI9's Spooks alone, or the one in ten million psychics whose mental patterns are close enough to pass the scans. The technology also reacts to its user, readying itself before the wielder even consciously thinks of it. If any Psi-Tech is lost or stolen, then anyone who has regularly used the item may sense the direction to its location within 200 miles (320 km). All it takes is one melee attack, during which the psychic must concentrate and can do nothing else. All Psi-Tech is built using Mega-Damage materials, usually having around 280-320 M.D.C., and any weapons designed for melee combat are TK-shielded during fights, so they take no damage from parries.

TK Buster

A shotgun-sized weapon, with a large caliber barrel. The TK Buster was the first psi-gun created by the techs at DI9, and is crude compared to the later guns. Many still look favorably on the TK Buster, though, citing its more normal appearance as being preferable to the unusually styled gun-swords when operating in public, and its potentially more powerful blast. Detractors complain of its exorbitant drain of I.S.P. and short range. Still, many Spooks look upon it with nostalgia. As with all TK guns, the TK Buster is completely silent and leaves no trace of its ammo.

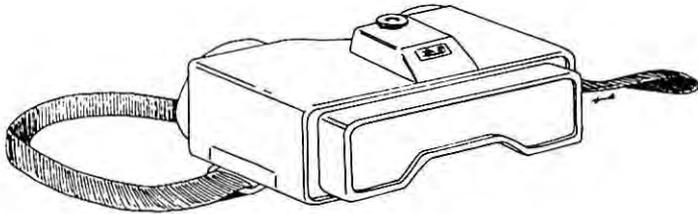
Weight: 10 lbs (4.5 kg).

Mega-Damage: 1D4x10 S.D.C. for 1 I.S.P., 2D4x10 S.D.C. for 2 I.S.P., 2D6 M.D. for 2 I.S.P., 3D6 M.D. for 4 I.S.P., 4D6 M.D. for 6 I.S.P., and 6D6 M.D. for 8 I.S.P.

Rate of Fire: Single shots only.

Effective Range: 100 feet (30.5 m), plus 50 feet (15.2 m) per level of experience of the wielder.

Payload: None. I.S.P. is pumped in when firing.



Soul Seeker Goggles

A set of what appear to be normal nightvision goggles, but when activated by a trained Spook, they reveal so much more. The goggles can pick up thought patterns, and translate these to light impulses. So when looking through these goggles, all sentient brains are represented by a glowing circle about five to six feet (1.5-1.8 m) above the ground. They are not blocked by solid objects, even walls. The Spooks have been known to shoot straight through walls, getting perfect head shots every time. When firing at a target seen through Soul Seeker Goggles, they can either aim at where the body should be (-3 to strike), or at the head (called shot), while the enemy may not even know where they are.

I.S.P. Cost: 3 I.S.P. per fifteen minutes. Removing the goggles breaks the link between Spook and goggles, and whatever time was left unused is lost. Just pushing the goggles onto the forehead doesn't break it, and allows normal vision without costing I.S.P.

TK Chute

The TK Chute is a vest worn under normal clothes, and barely noticeable. The chute is designed to prevent damage when falling, by telekinetically slowing down the fall. Several jumps have been made from planes using TK Chutes, and all the Spooks who have tried this walked away without injury. It has become a favorite of many Spooks, who never go anywhere without one.

I.S.P. Cost: 3 I.S.P. per mile (1.6 km) of fall. Most falls from man-made structures are easily dealt with. It is even possible to spend just 1 I.S.P. and halve any falling damage.

Mirror Mind Shades

The Mirror Mind Shades allow the wearer to read surface thoughts, which are displayed to him as subtitles running along the bottom of his vision. Deep probes are impossible, and Mind Blocks leave the thoughts unreadable. The thoughts of anyone in sight can be read, even several people at the same time, although wearers must try to read them all simultaneously.

The Shades can also grant the user the ability to Speed Read, as per the psychic power.

I.S.P. Cost: 1 I.S.P. per round of subtling surface thoughts, and 2 I.S.P. per minute of Speed Reading.

Mobile Telepathy Boosters

Mobile Telepathy Boosters, usually referred to as "Mobiles" by Spooks, are shaped like mobile phones, and boost the range of telepathic conversations to one mile (1.6 km) per level of experience of the user, but only to another telepath with a Mobile. In the days after the Cataclysm, the Mobile quickly becomes one of the few reliable forms of communication.

I.S.P. Cost: 2 I.S.P. per minute of conversation. Can pay five per minute to boost the range to ten miles (16 km) per level of experience.

Phantom Cannon

The Phantom Cannon is DI9's first telepathic attack weapon, forcing the target to experience vivid and realistic hallucinations of his own worst fears. As the hallucinations are drawn from the victim's own private demons, they are more terrifying than any standard imagery that could be planted in the brain. In effect, the victim is scaring himself!

Weight: 2.5 lbs (1.1 kg).

Mega-Damage: None. Instead, the victim must make a save vs Horror Factor of 18, suffering all the usual penalties should they fail. There is also a slim (2%) chance of the victim gaining an insanity related to the fear he was exposed to. Each horror blast costs the Spook 3 I.S.P. and takes one melee attack.

Rate of Fire: Single shots only.

Effective Range: 100 feet (30.5 m) per level of experience of wielder.

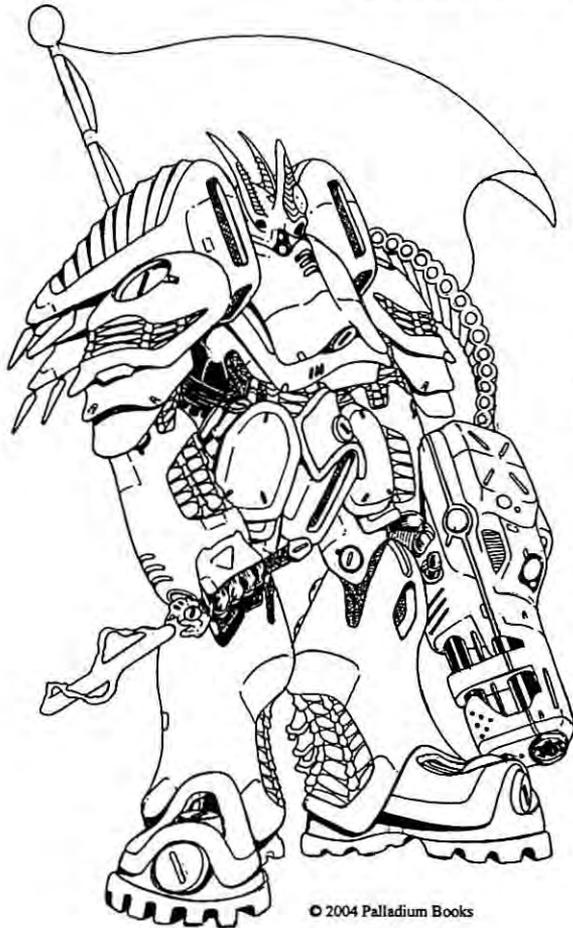
Payload: None. I.S.P. is pumped in when firing (3 I.S.P. per shot).

Ecto-Grapple

Perhaps the most bizarre tool to come from DI9 is the Ecto-Grapple, shaped like a flare gun with an oversized cylindrical barrel. When the I.S.P. is pumped in and the trigger pulled, a line of luminous green ectoplasm is ejected, with a claw-like hand at the end that attaches itself to whatever the gun was aimed at. The ectoplasm, which is stronger than that normally created, then forms a rope which can be used by the Spook just like a normal line with no chance of the claw losing its grip. This ectoplasmic cable can support the user's weight, plus 10 lbs (4.5 kg) per level of experience. The line can pay out to 100 feet (30.5 m) per level of experience (halved if in sunlight), the length being controlled by thought. Though the ectoplasm is more solid than normal, it lacks the flexibility of use you get with normal ectoplasm, and is useless in combat. The grapple has a clip on the butt end that can be attached to a belt or harness to leave the hands free.

I.S.P. Cost: 3 I.S.P. per round, taking up the first attack every round. Failure to pay means the ectoplasm vanishes, which can be dangerous halfway up a skyscraper...

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Gun-Swords

The same tool that Arr'Thuu uses in the future of **Rifts® England**, the Gun-Sword is the culmination of the Psi-Tech program, fitting several advanced systems into the same tool. A Vibro-Blade can be supplemented with a Psi-Sword that lasts for phenomenal lengths of time. The sword can also be thrown, and will telekinetically return to the wielder's hand. Added to that is a barrel which fires a short-range TK gun with variable damage ratings. All in all, a most potent weapon for the Spooks.

Weight: 5 lbs (2.25 kg).

Mega-Damage: 2D4 M.D. from the Vibro-Blade, 1D6 M.D. per level of experience from the Psi-Sword, which costs 5 I.S.P. for 15 minutes per level of experience.

When shooting, can inflict 4D6 S.D.C., 2D4x10 S.D.C., 1D6 M.D., 2D6 M.D., or 3D6 M.D., with each blast costing 1 I.S.P., regardless of damage.

Rate of Fire: Single shots only.

Targeting Bonus: The fine construction gives a bonus of +3 to strike when shooting. When thrown, the sword can be telekinetically guided, giving a bonus of +5 to strike, but P.P. bonuses are not used. Throwing costs one I.S.P. and two attacks (one to throw, one to bring it back).

Effective Range: Throwing the sword has a range of 25 feet (7.6 m) per level of experience, whilst the gun can fire up to 100 feet (30.5 m) per level of experience.

Payload: None, I.S.P. is pumped in when firing.

Experience Charts

The Psionic Collective O.C.C.

The Combat Spook O.C.C.

- 0,000-2,240
- 2,241-4,480
- 4,481-8,960
- 8,961-17,920
- 17,921-25,920
- 25,921-35,920
- 35,921-50,920
- 50,921-70,920
- 70,921-95,920
- 95,921-135,920
- 135,921-185,920
- 185,921-225,920
- 225,921-275,920
- 275,921-335,920
- 335,921-395,920

The SFE

Commando O.C.C.

- 0,000-2,150
- 2,151-4,300
- 4,301-8,600
- 8,601-17,200
- 17,201-25,500
- 25,501-63,000
- 63,001-52,000
- 52,001-73,000
- 73,001-98,000
- 98,001-134,000
- 134,001-184,000
- 184,001-240,000
- 240,001-295,000
- 295,001-385,000
- 385,001-450,000

RIFTS

Running a Character Driven Mercenary Campaign

Optional Rules and Game Master Tips for Rifts®

By Ian Schroen

There is something endearing about a free army, a group of men and women rising from obscurity to infamy, the ascension from the minors into the majors. Something magnificent about the epic which depicts a hero's rise to power and all the bumps along the way. Grandeur in the tale which asks, "was it worth it?" This is the type of campaign I like to run in **Rifts®**. I like to tell the story of the players, and I find that story is best told in a mercenary campaign.

Take *Larsen's Brigade* for an example. Here we have a group with ordinary beginnings, the core of the army consisting of troops stationed under Larsen's command when he was a Major in the Coalition Army. Yet the story of their rise to power is one of a man who defied the Emperor. Refusing to kill innocent D-Bees, Larsen was imprisoned. And so his troops defied the Emperor, broke their commander out of prison, and fled for the south. Fearing the legend of the defiant Major Larsen, the Coalition created him a new one: the legend of the great Major Larsen, who retired honorably to fight the demons of the south for the safety of all mankind. But this wasn't an unconditional pardon. If Larsen and his troops want to remain CS citizens, if they want their families to be safe inside the walls of Coalition cities, they can not act or speak against the Emperor or the Coalition.

This makes for quite a sticky drama. The Coalition isn't going to change their stance on D-Bees anytime soon. Likewise, Larsen doesn't want to see innocents killed in some self-righteous cause. Yet a balance must be maintained, else the floodgates come crashing open. How does he walk the thin line between standing up for D-Bees and standing against the Emperor? It is exactly these types of questions, these situations, which drive the drama in a mercenary campaign. To reach a level of power, certain pacts, deals, and alliances must be made. In time, these ties will come to be tested. Some will bend. Some will break. The time may come when your players must betray a friend, an ally, an employer. Or the time may come when those allies would betray them. The real story isn't the plot, but the players. How do they overcome adversity? How do they face their fears and make the tough choices? I contend that the best game is run for your players, about your players.



When you run a mercenary campaign for your players, this drama is further intensified by two things: *player shape* and *player control*. *Player shape* is a type of campaign design where the bulk of the plot is the character development of your players. *Player control* is a type of adventure design which allows the players to directly affect the campaign and change the world they live in. Add these two elements together, and you have the basics of a great mercenary saga: a character driven campaign.

Character Driven Campaigning: Player Shape

Soliciting Player Involvement

Profound insight #372: A campaign is only character driven when the player characters drive it. So, you may ask, how does a G.M. get his or her players involved? You ask them, of course. You tell them that you want the campaign to be based around their characters' histories and goals, and to do so you will need their help. And when that doesn't work, you bribe them with experience points. I've found that one part asking, one part bribing, and one part nagging will almost always produce that character involvement you require. Now that you've got the players on board, we'll need them to write a character bio and regular journals.

Player Character Bios

A bio could be the single most important (and most often overlooked) part of character creation. The **Rifts**® character sheet and O.C.C. description spells out all of the technical details of a character. It defines all the statistical elements for the player. It lists percentages and dice pools. Yet, it hardly leaves space for the really good stuff, like the character's past, his hopes and dreams, his goals. Hardly any room at all is left for terrors which visit the character at night, or the family and friends so often left behind. But this is the good stuff; this is what great adventures are made of, what great campaigns are made of.

A character bio is the first thing you need to bribe your characters for. Now, if you ask any player about his character's history, he could undoubtedly give you a decent spiel. But that history would likely change the next time he saw a really cool TV show or movie. I'm not suggesting that your players can't model their characters after people in TV, or movies, or comics. A lot of players do. They just have to stick to the story they decide on. And that's not the only reason you are paying them experience to write a bio. You want details.

The Basics. You know, age, appearance, disposition, that sort of thing. As a rule of thumb, if the character sheet has a space for it, you want it in the bio, and you want it in detail. What age do they look? Do they have facial hair? Hair color? Eye color? Do they have any distinctive tattoos, scars, or birthmarks? What mannerisms or style of dress distinguish them from others? What sort of jewelry or equipment do they always wear? How do they generally treat people? Civilians? D-Bees? Coalition troops?

History. You want a good, detailed history. You're not always going to get one, but take what you can get. Even a bad, poorly written history will provide you with adventure ammunition. You just need a few key pieces of information: Where did the character grow up? Are they a citizen of the Coalition States or any other major power? Do they have loyalty to any stately power? Have they served in any military or belonged to any trade or magic guild? Do they have loyalty to any group or persons? Do they have any family or close friends?

Goals and Dreams. Very simply, what does the character want to do with his life? What are the character's immediate and long-term goals? If they claim to have none, what motivates the character? Honor? Greed? Hate? Similarly, what does the character dream about? What do they want to see in a perfect world? And what gives the character nightmares? What do they fear the most? Do those fears petrify the character, or drive him to action?

Prey. Who might the character be chasing after? This can include people who have hurt, betrayed, or conned the character in the past, small or large. It could be a low-life addict or a big-time drug dealer, a Free Quebec boot-shiner or a CS general, a small-fry Conjuror or a High Magus. The prey could be human, D-Bee, or monster. The prey can also be an object of great power or importance, but those with an object-prey often have several person-preys, people who have gotten in the character's way over the years while pursuing the object.

Predators. Who might be chasing after the characters? Who has the character upset in the past? Who is seeking retribution against them, or who is trying to imprison them? Have they stolen from anyone in the past, or committed any other crimes against others? Killed any others? Do they have any bounties on their heads?

Acquaintances. Anyone the character knew or knows worth mentioning. It's best to encourage the players to think of as many as they can, since both player and G.M. can use this information down the line. Good acquaintances include old friends, allies, partners, military buddies, traveling companions, prison cell mates, teachers, mentors, public leaders, rivals, bullies, etc. Tell them to list anyone they have a current relationship with or had a meaningful relationship with in the past, good or bad. The player only needs to provide a name and minor background on the relationship.

Ideally, character bios are completed at the start of a campaign, or whenever a new character is created. But if you are already in the middle of a campaign, getting bios from your characters is still useful. Once your players have completed the bio, there is the matter of payment. This all depends on how much experience you give out in a typical adventure, since you don't want to give out more than that. Typically, I give out between 500-1000 experience points for any written materials that the players give me. If this seems a little too high or low to you, adjust it accordingly.

Player Character Journals

I always ask my players to write me a journal at the end of each adventure, in exchange for some extra experience. The journal needs to be written from the point of view of their char-

acter. It doesn't need to be too long; one page is enough, even half will do. You want them to write about what their character thought during and after the mission. How did the outcome — or the adventure itself — affect their character? Did it change their attitudes about any NPCs or the other player characters? Where does their character want to go from this point forward? For your players' benefit, you might ask that they include any contacts the players made during the adventure.

The journal is a way for you to peer into the mind of a player character, a way for the G.M. to know his thoughts and feelings. Think of it like you are writing a novel. The power of the novel is the ability to jump into the mind of a character. This is what makes a book good, and it can make a campaign good, too. Written letters and e-mails are a great way to receive the journals, because this isn't the sort of thing you want to share with the other players in the group. Journals should remain between you and the player who wrote them. You will use the journal as a tool to help develop adventures, so keep them private.

How many experience points should you give them? Well, it depends. You could adopt some standard fee, but I like to reward the points subjectively. Since the journal is another form of role-playing, I award experience based on two things: how well the role-playing is done, and how useful it is to the G.M. The better the role-playing is done, the more it will keep the player interested in the campaign and their character. The more useful the journal is to you, the more adventure ammunition you'll get out of it.

Developing Adventures Around the Players

This is why I bribe the player characters, to make adventures that they will care about, to construct a world they will want to be a part of. Using the material you solicit from them, you can do just that. I promise you, your players will get more involved when they feel that their character is at stake. When your adventures play up to their hopes and fears, and focus on developing them and not just a plot line, they will be more active than ever. Part of this interest is merely the increased activity. If your players are writing up journal entries, they are actively working on the campaign in between sessions, which helps keep the fire burning. But more than that, since their character is so involved in the story, the excitement and anticipation builds.

To develop adventures around your player characters, use their bios to create a few different storylines. Use their histories, their goals and dreams, their prey and predators, their acquaintances. For example, take a character who is an ex-military guy. Maybe the military he worked for isn't too happy that he left. Or maybe he isn't too happy with that military. Or perhaps one of the governments or groups he fought against is still after him for something specific that he did while in the military. Don't forget, old commanders and allies would make good NPC contacts to offer jobs and information to the character.

Here are a few more examples: If the character has close ties to family members or friends, they can be used as contacts, used to provide aid, or used against the character by villains. If the character has ties to a criminal organization, those ties could be used to provide employment, fund organizations or missions, or

become a minor or major threat to the player and his group. If the character has served time in a prison, he might be closely tailed by law enforcement when in certain towns, have greater contacts in the black market and underworld, or have allies and enemies from the prison who may come looking for him.

But what do you do if the player refuses to give you a history or claims his character has no recollection of the past? You make one up and reveal it to the player in parts. I like to take that player's favorite TV or movie character, modify the character for *Rifts*® and the campaign setting, and use that model as the background. You don't want to copy the fictional character bit for bit, but get the main stuff. I like to use dreams, written out in private notes for the player, to help piece together the character's past, revealing it over time.

Similarly, don't underestimate the power of the hidden past and hidden identity. When a character provides a generic background or a small background, it gives you plenty of room to tweak it. One of the more interesting things to do in this situation is to work with the player to develop his hidden past. Maybe the ex-Coalition Grunt doesn't know much at all about the Coalition, because he was really hired by a third party to infiltrate your player's group. Or perhaps the City Rat has a drug addiction, he owes a lot of people a lot of money, and a Chi-Town biker gang wants him dead by any means necessary because the gang leader's son overdosed on drugs he bought from the City Rat. Or maybe the character just has some insanity which he hides from the group, like multiple personality disorder. If you can't use what the player provided you in the bio, work with him to create something you'll both like, something which will give you plenty of that adventure ammunition.

Remember, your players' bios aren't written in stone. You're the Game Master. You have the ultimate discretion, dramatic license if you will, when it comes to a character's past. If you think changes will better the campaign, go ahead and make them, but discuss the changes or additions you have with the player first. Sometimes, all you need to ask is, "do you mind if I add a few things to your character's past?" If a player has a rather short bio, they usually won't mind the help. But if they do seem really opposed to your ideas, try to find another way to go about it.

One-On-One Role-Playing

The success of a character driven campaign is further fueled by one-on-one role-playing sessions. Using these mini-gaming sessions, you can better involve the player's bio and journals. This type of communication will keep the players fired up about their characters in-between adventures. Don't forget, the player journal is a form of one-on-one role-playing initiated by the player. This section will cover the various types which are initiated by the Game Master.

Keep in mind, this type of role-playing is private. The dialogs remain between you and the player character, and thus allow for and encourage a level of involvement the player might otherwise be uncomfortable with. For example, the character might want to be devious and take advantage of some of the other players in the group; backstabbing just doesn't work when they see it coming. But private communication isn't always negative. The player might have some things he wants to role-play,

but feels embarrassed doing it in front of the other players. Or maybe he's just not the best role-player, period. I've gamed with more than a few people who were smart and imaginative, but not very good actors. I've also played in groups where one player runs the show and railroads the other players into his vision. For all these scenarios, individual role-playing presents the players with extra opportunities to game. And since these situations usually happen before or after an adventure, it's going to pump the player up for the next adventure when you're done.

One-on-one role-playing can be done in several ways, but largely falls into two categories: direct and indirect. *Direct methods* include some active dialog between you and the player. For example, if you spoke privately in another room or you passed in-game notes back and forth. By the way, I can't stress enough, when doing individual role-playing during an adventure, make it as brief as possible. You want to keep things flowing at a good pace, with few interruptions. *Indirect methods* consist of passive, usually one-way, communication. For example, sending the player an e-mail or handing them a written (or typed) letter at the beginning of a session. I like to send e-mail teasers to my players on a semi-regular basis, especially if we had to miss a scheduled gaming session. That way, when the next session starts, they already have ideas about what they want to do. Below, I have listed some of the more common techniques.

Dreams. Dreams are a great way to generate character interest. First, it doesn't have to make sense, since it's a dream. You don't want to get too carried away, but you certainly have a lot of liberty with how you present the information you want to share with the player. Dreams usually consist of events or people from the character's past. When used correctly, dreams encourage a character to explore that aspect of his past. They can also be nightmares, reliving moments from the campaign's past or the character's past. They can be used to remind the player of facts they may have forgotten, or things you forgot to mention. Dreams should generally be sent as an e-mail or written down and handed to the player. Players shouldn't show the letter to others, but they can certainly discuss it, in character, with the group.

Visions and Omens. Omens are quite similar to dreams; they occur in a dream-like state, showing a single player character some event. The main difference between the two is that the omen or vision shows some event of the future (usually something bad) with some measure of accuracy. Omens can be given to the player before the adventure starts, randomly in the middle of an adventure, or right after a critical event. For example, one might see the omen of another's death while shaking their hand or while passing by a powerful ley line or nexus. Many times omens can be even more powerful than dreams, because they create anticipation and raise questions. For example, let's say you have one player character, Adam, experience an omen where he sees the death of Jay, another player character. Now, you have Adam wondering why in the world he saw this, and he will keep an eye out for this event to try and stop it. Then, if he decides to tell Jay, you have another player character wondering why he would be killed, watching his back, and questioning where Adam got this power, if his vision was correct, or if he is even telling the truth.

NPC Letters. Probably my favorite one-on-one plot device, the letter has two great uses aside from just being interesting. If you forget to tell the players something during an adventure, the letter is a good way to make up for it. Similarly, if you wanted to tell one player something private, but you didn't get the opportunity to, here's the chance. Letters are also good for sparking the beginning of adventures. Sometimes, players and G.M.s have a hard time getting the ball rolling at the start of an adventure. They've decided they want to play, but are not sure where to start. However, if you send the players a letter from an NPC before the adventure, offering information, they'll want to follow up on that letter as soon as the adventure begins. A letter will set them up with questions to ask and start them down the road of investigating, plus it won't feel forced. The letters can contain almost any information. It could be as simple as, "*Your reputation travels far. I'd like to meet you.*" Or perhaps it could be a job lead from a friend or ally. It might contain information about a bounty one of the player's has on his head, or a tip-off that a shady character has been asking about them. The letter may contain seedy offers from the black market or other criminal organizations to smuggle some items, kill a friendly NPC, or help capture another player character. Or they can just be flavor text, to explain the world through an NPC's eyes.

All the forms of individual role-playing work to make adventures more exciting for your players. They help focus the players' attention and effort on the campaign. They make the players care about their characters; and like it or not, that is your job as the G.M. All the player has to do is roll 'em up, but it's up to you to make the character interesting. It's up to you to bring the character's past to life. The only thing the player can create is a personality; the rest is your responsibility. And remember, this is role-playing. So if the player is actively involved in it, don't forget to give out some experience points.

Character Driven Campaigning: Player Control

Give the Players Control

In my style of Game Mastering, I have adopted the principle of "reverse railroading." Rather than pushing the characters in the direction I want the campaign to go, I let their actions and their decisions drive the story line. I make it a point to have their actions affect the world they live in. It gives meaning to their actions — meaning and consequences. As an active participant, your players will be more motivated to role-play, which in turn makes a more enjoyable experience for you, as the Game Master. You give the players control in two ways: through player-controlled organizations and player-picked adventures.



Player-Controlled Organizations

Your players really don't get the true mercenary experience unless they create and control their organization. Understandably, groups consisting of players new to **Rifts®** and Palladium probably won't be up to the task of creating their own organization right out of the gate, but you can still give them some measure of control, and increase their involvement as the campaign progresses. When they control the organization, they are going to want to work for it. They are going to research things in-between adventures to try and better their organization. It's all about raising the level of enthusiasm, which player control does.

With respect to player-created organizations, I refer you to the **Rifts® Adventure Guide**. Not only does it contain the creation rules for mercenary companies, secret organizations and towns, but it has a great section on how to handle player-created groups. As a side note, a secret organization or a town would work just as well as a mercenary company. The only changes I would suggest to the rules printed in the **Adventure Guide** are with regard to time. If your players are running adventures to generate income to pay for the company, find sponsorship and the like, I say that's enough time to create the organization. Speaking of adventures, the creation process makes for a slew of adventures and side quests. For every part of the organization's creation, there is an adventure to be had to secure the things they require. Your characters may need to persuade someone for sponsorship, find someone able to design and produce any outfits, procure their equipment and hire individuals capable of maintaining them, purchase and transport vehicles back to their H.Q., secure a weapons supplier, and so on. Every item the organization selects has an adventure to get it, and likely an adventure to keep it. If they hired a con-man or a gang of robbers, for example, there is a ton of adventure material right there.

Once the company is created, give your players control! Perhaps they aren't ready for full control, but at least give them meaningful roles. If they can't be the leaders, make them officers. If they can't be the decision makers, make them problem solvers. When you role-play as their leader, ask the players for their opinions on all decisions. If the decision isn't critical for you to decide, take a vote among them. Involve them as much as possible with the big decisions of the company, and when appropriate, turn over all such control to players. I assign different tasks to my players, like combat leader, training officer, and administrative officer. There are a lot of things that need to be done, which your players can do, to run the company. When troops are killed in combat, replacements need to be found. If you have vehicles or power armor, the specific units will need to be picked, purchased, and delivered. Someone needs to devise how the security system works. If the company upgrades the security, or communications, or the base, they need to hire a company to do it. If they have hired any criminals, someone needs to monitor and direct their actions, and deal with any situations which could arise from conducting said activities. If interested, you can name some of the higher ranked troops (NPC) in your army and watch their progression, promoting them when appropriate.

In dealing with combat control of the mercenary group, I recommend the *Modern Army Combat Rules* by Dan Felkins, printed in **The Rifter® #23**. When running large scale combat, I suggest breaking the army into several squads or platoons, so

that each player will have an army piece they get to control in the battle. Draw up your NPCs in similar sizes to make for fair combat. Dan's rules are quick to stat-up, and they play fast, too. Give your players control of the army and control of the company.

Player-Picked Adventures

Do you remember those old books from grade school where you got to choose your own adventure? When you reached the end of a page, you could decide whether to continue on page 13, 26, or 44. Let your players choose their own adventure — let them pick what storylines to involve themselves in. It will mean a little extra work on your part, but it will be well worth it. The players can never change their world if the G.M. doesn't let them decide what do to. All players want power. If you increase them in level quickly or give them big toys, it can get old fast. Instead, give them control. Give them freedom. You'll find it works just as well, and lasts a heck of a lot longer.

From the very beginning, have some options for your players to pick from: multiple supporting NPCs, multiple enemies, and multiple missions. Give the players some different avenues to travel, even if they are only generic at first. Some good, simple options for employers are a local sheriff posting bounties, a criminal organization or two, or a number of possible sponsors or investors for the mercenary company. It's fun to have rival groups bidding for the group's help. Let them decide who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. They could always flip between the two if they wanted. Have a couple different main villain focuses. They can all be explored, just let the players determine what order to do it in and what villains are worth exploring. The best main villains are going to be NPCs associated with the characters' past, or a character from an early part of the campaign, like a former employer who double-crosses the group. Include a wide range of minor villains like Wild Vampires, biker gangs, bandits and raiders, rogue military groups, other mercenary companies, and others. Let the players decide what kind of bad guys they want to fight, and develop the storyline on those NPCs.

Give the players options when it comes to adventures. When I G.M., I have at least three adventures ready to go each time we game, so the players can choose what they want to do. If they ignore a particular adventure for too long, it gets cycled out of rotation. Now, you may be thinking, "Ian, this is too much work." But it's not; you just have to do it smart. There are tricks you can use. Take the idea of rival groups, for example. If you have a gang which claims a particular 'Burb as its turf, and another gang who wants to take over the territory, you have two adventures. Adventure One: Help the one gang protect their land. Adventure Two: Help the second gang take it over. But you only have to draw one map. The gangs will be similar in equipment and weapons, so you only need to roll up one set of NPC stats. Two adventures for the price of one.

Or what if your players are in a credit crunch, and need to make a quick buck? Page 50 of **Siege on Tolkeen™ Two: Coalition Overkill™**, lists a number of prices for various creature bounties. With the exception of vampires, bounty missions for any of these creatures could take place on the same general map and have the same general NPCs; the only thing which would change is the number of the creatures being sought after for

bounty. Another thing to consider is when dealing with a large opponent, such as the Coalition States, the stats of the NPCs will remain pretty much the same, only maps and objectives (and maybe selected tanks and power armor) will change. Thus, it wouldn't require too much extra work to make three missions against the CS instead of one. The same would be true for vampire missions.

Bottom Line: Put the pieces on the board for them. Set up NPC contacts and power struggles, but let them choose the direction and side. Let them move the pieces.

Campaign and Adventure Tips

Adventure Prep

If you want the adventure to run smoothly, you need to be prepared. Duh, right? I think it's worth mentioning that organizing your random information can be very useful. When you design an adventure, you probably already have made the map and NPC stats ahead of time. Thus, what ends up slowing down the campaign is trying to look up all the things you didn't plan for. So, write them down. Now, you probably think I am just crazy, but you can predict what most of the random stuff will consist of. Here are my suggestions for reference material you may need handy in a notebook:

- A quick rundown of the player characters and their skills.
- A list of NPC stats for the major opposition in the campaign.
- A comprehensive list of the stores and services available in the main town the characters live in, along with names of the NPC operators.
- A list of NPC names you can use on the spot.
- Cost of E-Clips (new and recharged) and a few basic weapons and armor.
- Repair rates for body armor, power armor, and vehicles.
- Salvage rates for weapons and armor.
- Short list of magic/psionic skills your characters will use often, with range, duration, effect and saving throw.

Types of Adventures

There are a multitude of adventures you could run for a mercenary company. Below I have listed a few archetypes with examples of how I have used them in my campaigns. Be sure to use these ideas in conjunction with your player characters' histories. Also, don't forget that the **Rifts® Adventure Guide**, **Rifts®: Mercenaries**, and other books have a plethora of adventure ideas you can use and modify for your campaign.

Bounties. Bounties can include creatures or people, and are issued by various organizations, including the Coalition States, kingdoms and towns, gangs and criminal syndicates, and sometimes individuals. It is important to note whether a bounty is wanted "alive," or "wanted dead or alive." The distinction can change the whole adventure.

Rescue and Recovery. These adventures range from rescuing prisoners, hostages, or troops missing in action, to recover-

ing lost magic items or stolen property, to making salvage runs to active war zones.

Protection. The group could be hired to protect one individual or a small group, a business, or a town. Note the differences between protection in an urban and rural setting. Or, perhaps the group could be hired as the muscle in a criminal protection racket.

Free Army. Serving as a free army, the group acts as extra troops for an established military, such as that of a large kingdom. The group might also be hired for a contracted period to act as the military for a town or kingdom which recently suffered huge losses, or has yet to conscript a large military force of their own.

Smuggling. It's all about getting the goods (probably illegal) from point A to point B. However, there is likely going to be competition from rival gangs and syndicates.

Reconnaissance and Spying. The group could be hired to keep tabs on an individual or organization, track CS Military movement, or record the meetings of CS personnel, black market leaders, or locals gangs. It could be anything from following a small group in the wilderness to committing industrial espionage.

Assassination and Sabotage. The most exciting parts of these missions are the target and the contractor. Make them high profile. For example, corrupt CS officials might contract the group for some black ops, though there would likely be a series of tests and the characters would have to do a lot of research to find out who the employer really is. Also, criminal organizations might hire the group to target rival syndicates, public officials, or possibly members of the I.S.S.

The Unavoidable. Part of the mercenary experience is routine work, like finding new contacts and new jobs. Missions that don't generate money, but have to be done. For example, the players may have to escape from a job gone wrong or a trap. They might have to deal with a double-crossing employer. Today's ally could be tomorrow's enemy based on what jobs the company takes, and they will have to deal with those consequences. Furthermore, many elements of the players' past won't generate revenue for the company, but will need to be perused in the interest of the campaign.

General Campaign Ideas

Your idea about where the campaign should go should be sufficiently vague to leave room for the player characters' story to take center stage. Some campaigns, you get lucky. The players turn their bios in on time, and you have plenty of good stuff to make a campaign arc out of in there. Other times, it takes a while for the characters to develop their past before something interesting takes shape. In the latter case, you can develop a central arc which leaves room for the characters, but can fill the plot needs in case nothing major develops.

Keep in mind that nothing is written in stone. Your campaign can change all the time. If it hasn't happened yet, it's fair game for revision. You should do that revision if it means incorporating your characters' goals and backgrounds. It's also good to have a couple campaign arcs going at once, so the characters can choose the one they are interested in. If you feel like this wastes your time, cannibalize the rest. Use bits and pieces from the unused plot lines in the main one your players pick.

An underworld campaign is one ideally suited for the character driven focus. The black market and criminal world are full of various groups, gangs, syndicates, and organizations which all have different motives and ideals. Most crime lords also engage themselves in legitimate businesses, so it allows for all the adventure types described above, and more. Moreover, since these organizations tend to be secretive, it leaves plenty of room for plot twists which involve the characters' histories. For example, we have a player, Joe, whose family was killed by a crime boss. His motivation for being in the campaign would be to get revenge. But what happens when Joe finds out that the organization he's been working for is controlled by the very same boss? Or maybe he doesn't find out until it's too late. Maybe the crime boss has been setting him up the whole time, teasing the group with false leads for his own amusement.

There are tons of possibilities and plenty of options for your players. They could pick a criminal syndicate to join, trying to rise up through the ranks by besting their rivals. Or they could do jobs for all the rivals, playing each of the factions, trying not to get burned. Or they might start their own syndicate. Plus, the criminal element will open a number of opportunities for providing protection to individuals and businesses, to collect on the bounties of wanted criminals in the underworld, as well as shady opportunities like contracted hits and hijacking from smugglers. They might decide that once they have made some money, both a mercenary company and a criminal organization would be lucrative businesses, so they should operate both. It's all about giving the players options. Tell the players' story. The underworld is a good setting in which to do that.

The Cost of Doing Business

There are a lot of costs associated with operating a mercenary company or other player-controlled organization. Enforcing these costs will increase the level of role-playing. For example, if a player needs to purchase something, they will want to try and haggle down the price. Sometimes threatening the seller might lower it. Other times, playing down the real value does the trick. Both of these mean role-playing. Also, some costs can be avoided, like stealing ammo. Be more sneaky and creative, save money on ammunition and armor repairs. Again, role-playing. But sometimes, the costs aren't tangible materials like credits or black-market items; rather, the player group must perform a task for the seller or agree to repay the seller with a favor. The following is a list of costs the players may incur.

Job Leads. Sometimes, information on a job is free. For example, information on a Coalition bounty isn't likely to cost you anything. But many times, job information is going to cost you. Take criminal activity; getting a job working for a criminal syndicate, if you aren't a member of the syndicate, is usually done through some agent. That agent might be the local bartender, and he will want to get paid for his service. For job leads, the agent usually charges some percentage of the expected payoff, say 2-8%.

Information. Information isn't free. If you need a detailed recon of the inside of a military installation, or you want to know the whereabouts of a criminal figure or political leader, you'll need to pay someone. Payment for information is fairly subjective. It depends on how well the informant trusts the

group, and how important the information is. The minimum is 500 credits, but can increase rapidly into the thousands and tens of thousands depending on the circumstances.

Weapons and Ammunition. Until the mercenary company pays for weapons, the players will need to supply their own. Prices for weapons will vary, but E-Clip rates remain fairly consistent. The **Rifts® Game Master Guide** is a great reference for these prices. Remember, all prices can fluctuate, depending on how many other places in town can provide the merchandise, and how much the NPC working there likes the players.

Armor Repairs. Until the mercenary company pays for outfits, the players will need to supply and repair their own armor. Even if the company supplies it, they will likely want better armor than the company gives to its troops. For body armor, repairs will cost between 100 to 200 credits per 1 point of M.D. repaired. For power armor, tanks, and robots, the cost is 700 to 1000 credits per 1 point of M.D. repaired. Armor with more than 40% of its original M.D.C. value depleted will cost twice as much to repair. Armor with more than 75% of its original M.D.C. value depleted will cost 3 to 4 times more to repair. Armor with the main body destroyed will cost close to the original purchase cost to repair, depending on the value of the remaining parts.

Payroll. Managing the salary of the troops is an interesting part of the mercenary organization. If your players feel up to it, you can remove the company creation costs associated with the different pay scales. Then, whichever scale they pick, the company will be responsible for paying that salary from the company's profits. The better the salary, the more reliable the troops will be to do missions without player character leadership. If the group hasn't formed a mercenary company, but still wants to hire on some extra troops, a salary of 200-600 per week per soldier is appropriate.

Collateral Damage. A mercenary organization is going to be responsible morally and often legally to pay for the damages caused while performing a job. This most commonly occurs during bounty missions. If during the mission, private or government property was destroyed, the group may have to repay those costs. This is always going to be a fudged cost, unless a specific item was destroyed and you can look up the cost. For example, 6D6x100 for minor damages to homes, 6D6x1000 for major damages to homes, 6D6x10,000 for major damages to government buildings.

Game Master Tips

Making Adventures More Exciting

There are a few easy tricks to making your adventures more exciting. The easiest and most effective is the potential of overwhelming odds. While your players are moving toward an objective, and when they roll to Prowl or Detect Ambush, have a large number of enemy units patrol past the group. Maybe they can take one Spider Walker or Terror Trooper, but how about ten or twelve? If one of the players failed a Prowl roll, maybe one of the troops will break away to investigate the situation, getting very close to the players, but not engaging them in combat. Be dramatic in explaining the situation, and it will raise the excitement level.

Another easy way to excite players is to force the players to count ammo and limit the number of clips they can bring on a mission. A number of Game Masters just ignore ammunition, but it's an important part of the game. It helps balance the different weapons, and it creates drama. The adventure goes to a whole new level when a player runs out of ammo. Or put them in situations where they don't have very much ammo at all, like a meeting with a gang leader that goes wrong, and they were only allowed limited weapons.

Playing Fair

As the Game Master, it's your responsibility to always give the appearance of being fair and impartial, regardless of whether or not you actually are. You want the game to be fun for the players, and they won't have fun if they think you are playing favorites or playing to win. To avoid playing favorites, I suggest using a random die to distribute damage. Go to your local gaming store and purchase a few tiny dice. I have a six-sided die and a four-sided die, both smaller than a blueberry. You don't have to use the damage die every time, just when it's appropriate. Here's how you use it: Say your players are fighting a group of

soldiers from a distance. The enemy soldiers aren't likely to single out any particular target. So before you have them attack, you assign each player a number on the die, roll, and assign who the NPC is attacking. Now, why the tiny die? Because it's more difficult for the players to see it from where they are sitting. When you need to be partial or unfair, break out the damage die and do your thing; disregard the rolled value, and assign the damage to whomever you want. This is particularly useful if one of the player characters is secretly setting up another player.

Another trap many G.M.s fall into is playing to win. They think of the adventure as some battle between the player characters and the NPCs. *Avoid this thinking altogether.* Don't own your NPCs. Don't think of them as your characters, but rather as *obstacles you want the players to overcome.* Even so, from time to time, all G.M.s get bummed about an NPC. Maybe they expected the character to be a real challenge, and the players dispatched him with ease. In that case, it's understandable to be disappointed, just don't let it show. You can always turn it into a gag. Perhaps later in the campaign, the NPC's brother could come to seek vengeance, talking big about how he will defeat the players, and then have him be equally easy to defeat.

Remember, it's all about fun, both for the players, and for the Game Master.

THE PALLADIUM ORIENT

PALLADIUM FANTASY RPG[®]

Optional Rules and Source Material for the Palladium Fantasy RPG[®]

By Greg Diaczyk

This source material is the result of my desire to mix *Ninjas & Superspies[™]* into my *Palladium Fantasy RPG[®]* campaigns. Many of you, I'm sure, have your own ideas of mixing martial arts into the various settings, and notes on integrating *Ninjas & Superspies[™]* into them. At one time, official rules for integrating *Ninjas & Superspies[™]* into *Palladium Fantasy[®]* did exist, but that was for First Edition. But since *Palladium Fantasy[®]* got a facelift with Second Edition, the *Palladium Orient* was sort of left hanging without much to stand on. The material presented here, I hope, will make it easier for all of you to enjoy the exciting world of *Ninjas & Superspies[™]* and *Mystic China[™]* in a medieval setting.

To supplement this source material, one will find a copy of *Ninjas & Superspies[™]* essential. You may also find that *Mystic China[™]* and *Rifts[®] Japan* will have some useful information and character classes that can be easily adapted to the fantasy setting.

Where's the Palladium Orient?

In the campaign world that I use, I have designated the Land of the South Winds as my *Palladium Orient*.

This is due mostly to the fact that it is the only major human civilization at the time of this writing that hasn't been detailed. So, to me, it's simply a logical conclusion. However, some may prefer to slot this optional information into a lost coastal or island kingdom somewhere else. This nation could also be a colony of Timiro, the Land of the South Winds, or one of the many smaller kingdoms, or a completely different and isolated nation altogether.

What Classifies an Oriental Culture?

In Europe during the Middle Ages, the Orient was wrapped in mystery, adventure and danger. Many strange and wondrous products came out of China along the Silk Road, such as spices, precious metals, silk, fine crafts, tapestries, exotic animals and many other strange oddities that defied their imaginations. This feeling and theme are what I think classifies the Orient, espe-



cially to those other cultures at that time in the world. From a more straightforward or “modern Western” perspective, the people look different, and their attitudes, behavior and culture are different. Most survived on a staple of rice, and the use of bamboo (a unique and marvelous wood substitute which was used as food and in carpentry), and with a particular style of weapons, martial arts, honor, and, in Japan, a distinct caste system. Though the Japanese caste system was similar to Europe’s feudal system, it had farther reaching social implementations and cultural significance. One of the major aspects was the exclusion of weapon use by peasants and the lower class populace. This encouraged them to develop unarmed combat styles and weapons based on farm tools and simple household items. Many of the Oriental religious and philosophical ideas also opened up a better understanding of the mind and how the human body works, allowing them to unlock their hidden potential in combat and in medicine.

For the Palladium Orient, the culture is an amalgamation of all the wonders found in Earth’s Orient, with its own unique and distinct society in the Palladium setting. The Emperor and his court rule the nation. Each province is ruled by a warlord, who in turn divides his land among his nobles, who rule their territories. The nobles also have Samurai at their disposal. Each Samurai guards the interests of his warlord and protects him and the people under his care. They also govern and rule over the people in the land that they own (given to them by their warlord). In

times of war, the Samurai band together under their warlord, fighting for the Emperor (or in the case of civil war, fighting to expand their warlord’s territory or to take over the empire for their warlord!). For the most part, peasants tend to the day to day needs of the empire, growing and raising crops as well as performing the menial tasks of the empire. Only the nobles and military may carry and use weapons. However, to get around this law, many peasants have developed martial art forms using their hands and/or simple farming tools. Several middle class or wealthy families (though not nobles) own and operate a private dojo (school), teaching their family how to fight and protect themselves. Some of these dojos are public, and members are occasionally hired by the government as supplemental troops (sometimes cannon fodder), while other schools are secretive and teach darker, sinister martial art forms. There are even rumors of Ninja clans who lurk in the shadows, watching, stealing and assassinating at the whim of their masters or the highest bidder. Legends tell that these master assassins would consort with dark forces to perform their masters’ bidding, learning martial forms, and using weapons, all while hiding among the populace.

Economically, the nation relies heavily upon a fishing industry with a secondary supply from farming (mostly rice and other vegetables as well as some cattle and other livestock). They have an impressive navy made up of the finest ships and troops, though their numbers are nowhere near as great as those of Bizantium or the Western Empire.

Martial Arts

One of the major aspects of an Oriental fantasy game is the lure of martial arts. Being able to have a Warrior Monk that can disarm and defeat an entire barrage of soldiers, the cunning and stealthy Ninja master who hides in the shadows and strikes with speed, or the Samurai who's a deadly swordsman, nobleman and guardian of the people. As such, the Palladium Orient should not be without such additions. Several of the O.C.C.s presented in this article have the option of using martial arts. A copy of *Ninjas & Superspies™*, *Mystic China™* or even *Rifts® Japan* may be of use to G.M.s running an Oriental campaign. Further information will follow on how to incorporate these books into a Palladium Orient campaign.

Chi and P.P.E.

The use of Chi and/or P.P.E. is strictly up to the G.M. It may be easiest to use things as outlined in *Ninjas & Superspies™* and *Mystic China™*. However, if the G.M. wishes to use P.P.E. as THE "life energy" just as in *Rifts® Japan*, a simple conversion can be done. This option is probably best suited for characters that have a few martial art powers that don't use much Chi or none at all. Those who are using O.C.C.s from *Mystic China™* and that use P.P.E. and Chi together (such as a Chi Arcanist or Geomancer), would probably find using both Chi and P.P.E. much easier and more fitting to the original concept of the O.C.C.s. Use the normal determination factors for P.P.E. from *Palladium Fantasy®*. When it comes to the Warrior Monk and Martial Arts Master, ignore the normal rules for P.P.E. Instead, create the character as outlined, selecting the appropriate martial art form, and tabulate Chi based upon what is outlined in *Ninjas & Superspies™* and *Mystic China™*. (Final P.E. Attribute = Chi Points, plus any martial art bonuses or modifiers.) Take the determined Chi attribute and simply convert it to P.P.E., one for one. The larger than normal amount of P.P.E. can be considered a result of the character's training. They also receive an additional 1D4 points of P.P.E. per level of experience on top of anything outlined in their martial art form (adding or doubling the P.P.E. in place of the Chi). When it comes to using martial art abilities that require Chi to operate, again simply treat the Chi cost as a P.P.E. cost. I.e. to use Body Chi, the character spends 3 points of P.P.E. and gets a +15 to P.S. for one round.

Martial Art Powers Using P.P.E.

For the following Martial Art Powers, simply use them as they are presented in *Ninjas & Superspies™* and *Mystic China™*, using P.P.E. instead of Chi, or use the equivalent P.P.E. powers from *Rifts® Japan*.

Arts of Invisibility

No changes, except Art of Mystic Invisibility uses P.P.E. points instead of Chi.

Atemi & Advanced Atemi Abilities

No changes with the exception of Chi Block, which temporarily destroys 1D4 points of P.P.E. per strike.

Body Hardening Exercises & Demon Hunter Body Hardening Exercises

No changes.

Chi Mastery

Chi Awareness: This power can be thought of as P.P.E. Awareness or Magic Senses. All the powers are basically the same, except that they can also detect the amount of P.P.E. a character has (low, medium or high). They can also detect if it's negative or positive (undead or living), and if a character has Chi or Chi Mastery skills as well as magical skills, bestowed magical powers (Witches & Warlocks), etc. A Chi Master can also "shoot" positive or negative P.P.E. with Chi Combat to disrupt a mage's normal personal P.P.E. base with the same repercussions as lost Chi.

Dragon Chi (Fu Zhensong): Treat as the standard Wizard powers in regards to "Other Sources of P.P.E. and Ley Lines, Nexus Points & P.P.E." as outlined on pages 180 & 181 of the *Palladium Fantasy RPG®, Second Edition*.

All other powers use P.P.E. instead of Chi to operate, but are otherwise unchanged. P.P.E. can now have a negative or positive "flavor" to it.

Martial Art Techniques

No changes.

Special Katas

Sword Chi Techniques: Channels P.P.E. into the blade and functions as indicated, but the weapon is now considered magical and will now harm normally invulnerable supernatural and magical creatures.

All other powers are unchanged.

Chi Katas

No real change, with the exception that P.P.E. is seen, sensed or used.

Zenjorike

Mind Walk: Is unchanged except that the master becomes a being of pure mystic energy. This form would be sensed/detected by Psi-Stalkers (if brought into a *Rifts®* game), or people who can see/sense magical energy such as the Psychic Sensitive O.C.C., who would also be able to detect them and track them down.

Spirit Burst: Does damage to P.P.E. and will affect any living (positive P.P.E.) or undead (negative P.P.E.) creatures.

All other powers are unchanged.

Mudras use P.P.E.

Any Mudra requiring Chi instead uses the same amount of P.P.E. to activate.



Oriental O.C.C.s

Many of the conventional O.C.C.s found in the **Palladium Fantasy®** game are still very valid and applicable, although they have a different style of armor and somewhat different weapons.

Priests, Warrior Monks, Long Bowmen, Soldiers, Mercenary Fighters, Rangers, Thieves, Pirates, Sailors, most Optional O.C.C.s, Psychics and Magic O.C.C.s are all practical and valid. The G.M. may also allow these O.C.C.s to take Oriental cultural skills (as outlined in **Ninjas & Superspies™**, **Mystic China™** and **Rifts® Japan**), and give certain O.C.C.s, such as the Noble, the option of taking martial art forms. In this case the cost would be 6 O.C.C. Related Skills and whatever it costs to take **Hand to Hand: Martial Arts**.

Some of the O.C.C.s that are not really valid or have Oriental counterparts (to be described below) are Knights, Palladins and Assassins. Though these O.C.C.s could be given an Oriental flavor and used, they all have a valid Oriental counterpart that I think could be used instead.

Oriental Men of Arms

The Samurai/Ronin (Knights and Paladins)

The Ninja and the Ninja Clans (Assassins, Spies and Thieves)

Martial Arts Master (Combat Specialist)

Oriental Clergy

Warrior Monk (Optional Expansion of the O.C.C.)

Oriental Men of Arms

Samurai/Ronin O.C.C.

Warrior, gentleman, landowner, bureaucrat and servant, the Samurai is all these things to the people of his land and his warlord. Though very similar to the more traditional Knights and Palladins, there is a definite difference in their philosophy, martial art prowess and style. The Ronin are simply displaced Samurai, with no master and no honor, and as such are unpredictable and dangerous to the ruling lord, and are usually considered untrustworthy mercenaries and undesirables. For a more detailed description of Samurai/Ronin and how to play them, see **Rifts® Japan's True Samurai O.C.C.**

O.C.C. Abilities:

1. **The Way of the Horse (Horsemanship: Samurai):** Same as Horsemanship: Knight.
2. **Way of the Bow (Kyudo/Zen Archery):** The mastery of the bow allows the Samurai to shoot while riding at a full gallop. Their balance and precision also enables them to shoot their bow from a moving vehicle, in mid-air or from an awkward position without penalties.

Rate of Fire: Three at level one, +2 at level three, +1 at levels 4, 6, 9, 12 and 15.

Effective Range: 600 feet (182.8 m), +25 feet (7.6 m) per level of experience.



Zen Aimed Shot: By taking his time, concentrating and focusing on his target, the Samurai can better hit his target. +2 to strike with a bow on an aimed shot, but uses up two attacks/rate of fire that round.

Dodge Arrows: The Samurai can attempt to dodge arrows at a -2 penalty (normally -10), but, as usual, the dodge counts as an attack.

3. **Sword Mastery: Daisho (the Great and the Small):** Besides the usual bonuses for W.P. Sword, W.P. Paired Weapons: Swords and Hand to Hand: Zanji Shinjinken Ryu, the Samurai also gains a +1 on initiative, +3 to pull punch and an additional attack per melee round while using a sword. The Samurai also possesses a high quality set of daisho — a katana (long sword), 3D6 damage, and a wakizashi (short sword), 2D6 damage. 20% will either have a +1 to strike and parry each or do +2 damage each. There is also a 10% chance that they have a family set of daisho (passes from father to son, or grandfather to grandson, etc.). If this is the case, both weapons are of the utmost quality, have +2 to strike and parry, and do +3 damage! If they are a family set, there is a 2% chance that the weapons are also magical (select one magic feature or see the G.M. for their approval).
4. **Chi Demon Death Blow:** Basically the same as the Paladin and Warrior Monk. The Samurai can draw on his inner spirit (Chi or P.P.E.) and channel it through his attacks. The special attacks cost 2 attacks to use and 1D4 P.P.E./Chi. The attack can only be used against demons, supernatural creatures and creatures of magic. It does double damage to these opponents. For creatures who are immune to normal attacks, this attack inflicts normal damage (instead of double damage).
5. **P.P.E.:** P.E.x2 +1D6 per level of experience. However, if one is using the Martial Art Form Zanji Shinjinken Ryu and P.P.E. is used as THE “life energy,” the P.P.E. will be equal to Chi (P.E. +10 from initial bonuses from the Form) plus 1D6 per level.
6. **Other Bonuses:** +1 to save vs Horror Factor at levels 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 12. +1 to save vs Mind Control.

Hand to Hand: Zanji Shinjinken Ryu

Knows the following techniques to start: disarm, maintain balance, roll with punch/fall/impact, pull punch, karate punch (2D4) kick attack (2D4), knee and elbow strike (1D6), as well as the usual strike, parry and dodge.

Bonuses: +3D6 S.D.C., +2 M.E., +2 P.P. and +1 P.E.

Levels Bonuses:

- 1 Two attacks per melee, knife hand (2D4 damage); paired weapons, +2 on initiative, +2 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +2 to parry with sword or staff (in addition to W.P.), +3 to dodge, +2 damage, +2 to pull punch.
- 2 +1 attack, +1 to disarm, +1 to maintain balance.
- 3 +1 on initiative, +1 to strike, +1 to parry, Critical Strike from behind, Death Blow on a natural 20.
- 4 +1 attack, +2 damage.
- 5 Critical Strike on a natural 18-20, +1 to maintain balance.
- 6 +1 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +1 to dodge, +1 to maintain balance.

- 7 Power punch/stab (with hand or sword), jump kick and backward sweep kick.
- 8 +1 attack, +1 to dodge.
- 9 Death Blow 18-20, Knock Out/Stun on a natural 19-20.
- 10 +1 on initiative, +1 to maintain balance.
- 11 +1 attack.
- 12 +2 damage.
- 13 +1 attack.
- 14 Double existing P.P.E. and +1 disarm.
- 15 +1 attack.

If the game is being run using *Ninjas & Superspies™* and *Mystic China™*, the option of switching this hand to hand style for the actual Martial Art Form of Zanji Shinjinken Ryu may be taken. However, a few changes need to be made. The Samurai or Ronin loses all of his Weapon Proficiencies, cultural skills, his Prowl skill and the above O.C.C. Abilities #2 and #3. In exchange, he receives all the weapon katas, skills and martial art powers of the martial art form Zanji Shinjinken Ryu.

Samurai Family Background

01-10 Old nobility; a member of the ruling class dating back 1D6x100 years. The family is well known and is either a major political force or landowner.

11-15 A member of a new nobility and a minor landowner with a farming background.

16-20 A member of an old and respected family with a long history of patriotism and dedicated warriors. Minor landowner with a farming or military background.

21-25 A mere peasant farmer who took up arms and proved to have the soul of a warrior. The family are considered noble farmers who have earned a small portion of land. The Samurai may be looked down upon by the arrogant aristocrats, while others may see him with great respect, as he is a testament that nobility and honor are not a birthright, but can be acquired from any station in life.

26-47 A member of an old family of noble lineage with a military background.

48-54 A member of a new noble family with a background in medicine.

55-62 A member of a new noble family with a scholastic background; teachers, scholars, historians, artists and entertainers.

63-70 A member of the new nobility with a background as a business owner.

71-77 A member of the new nobility with a background in politics.

78-83 A member of the new nobility with a religious background; monks, yamabushi or priests in the family.

84-91 A member of the new nobility with a science background.

92-00 A new Samurai! A warrior who has risen through the ranks to prove himself a noble and honorable warrior from humble beginnings as a mercenary or Ronin.

Family Skills

Based upon the above family background, select three skills from the corresponding categories, and each gets a +10% bonus:

Old Nobility/Administrators: Make selections from Communication, Military and/or Technical.

Minor Landowner and Farmers: Select from Wilderness and Physical.

Wealthy Landowner and Farmers or Breeders of Livestock: Select either Math or Botany from the Science skills and/or any from the Domestic or Technical categories.

Military: Make selections from Espionage and/or Military.

Medicine: Make selections from the Science and/or Medicine categories.

Scholar/Teacher/Historian: Make selections from the Technical and/or Science skill categories.

Business Owner: Make a selection from either Math or Archeology from the Science category and/or any from the Domestic or Rogue categories.

Politics: Make selections from Communication, Domestic and/or Rogue.

Religious: Make a selection from Art, Language, Literacy, and Lore under the Technical category and/or any from the Science category.

Science: Make selections from the Science category.

New Samurai Warrior: Select from Rogue, Physical or Wilderness categories.

Alignment: Any alignment, though 33% are Principled, 33% Aberrant, 16% Scrupulous, 8% Anarchist and 10% other.

Attribute Requirements: I.Q. 9 P.S. 10 P.P. 12 and P.E. 10 or higher.

O.C.C. Skills:

Language: Native 98% plus two of choice (+15%).

Literacy: One of choice (usually native, +20%).

Mathematics: Basic (+15%)

Heraldry (+15%)

Military Etiquette (+10%)

Horsemanship: Knight/Samurai

Land Navigation (+10%)

Prowl (+10%)

W.P. Archery

W.P. Sword

W.P. Two of choice.

Hand to Hand: Zanji Shinjinken Ryu

O.C.C. Related Skills: Select three from Cultural/Domestic. Also select 2 other skills at level one, plus one additional skill at levels three, six, nine and twelve.

Communication: Any (+10%).

Cultural/Domestic: Any (+10%).

Espionage: Any (+5%).

Horsemanship: Exotic only (+5%).

Medical: First Aid only.

Military: Any (+10%).

Physical: Any except Acrobatics.

Rogue: Only available as Family Skills, above.

Science: Astronomy and Math only.

Technical: Any (+10%).

Weapon Proficiencies: Any.

Wilderness: Any (+5%).

Secondary Skills: The character can select two Secondary Skills from the above list at levels one, two, six and ten.

Standard Equipment: "Samurai" silks or cotton clothing (several changes), sandals, a utility belt, backpack, knapsack, two canteens, bedroll, tinderbox and 2D4 days of rations.

Armor: Starts with a suit of Samurai armor (combination steel, bamboo and leather). A.R.: 15, S.D.C.: 82.

Weapons: Daisho (pair of swords – katana, 3D6, and wakizashi, 2D6) as mentioned above, samurai long bow with 24 normal arrows. Also has two other weapons of choice, usually reflective of the chosen W.P.s.

Mount/Transportation: Quality riding horse. The horse has 30+2D6 S.D.C. and 6D6 Hit Points, running speed is 33, value 1D4x1000 gold!

Money: The character's warlord usually supplies him with all his basic needs: clothes, food, shelter, horse, arrows and other necessities. In addition, the Samurai usually comes from a modestly wealthy family and has a family house and village to go to (if not his own house). Starts with 100 gold.

Ninjas and the Ninja Clans

In these lands the Ninja are shrouded in mystery, legend and folklore. Some say they are nothing more than a band of thieves and assassins, others say they are Ronin or a mercenary army for the highest bidder. Others claim that they are a secret sect of sorcerers who use magic to hide their presence from the world and to disguise the true nature of their missions. Yet others claim they do not even exist at all.

In truth, they started out as a well financed spy network for the Land of the South Winds (or your selected Oriental nation). Over time, as they grew and developed their abilities and skills for the subtle arts, a small rift appeared between two factions in the network. An internal war soon erupted, leading to the division of the spy network into several smaller groups. The true nature of the dispute is not known, nor is where every member of the network ended up. Many were killed, which also shrouds the whole incident and cuts down on the number of real witnesses to this already secret society. What is known, however, is that these small groups solidified into the current Ninja clans of today.

The Ninja Clans

Rumors have it that there are anywhere from three to twelve Ninja clans. Some work for various governments, some are mercenaries, and others work both sides of the fence, and rumors even suggest the creation of a secret shadow empire that will one day reveal itself and dominate the world through their power and control of other powerful nations.

The clans, for the most part, are the same except in name and who they work for. Each clan is headed up by a leader, the Jonin, who either is the controlling force behind the clan or reports to a higher power (like a king, warlord or emperor). Beneath him are the Chunin, whose duties are the training and governing of the clan, including interacting with customers (for mercenary clans). The lowest are the Genin or "field Ninja." These are the members of the clan who are active in the field collecting information, establishing covers and positioning themselves in society, as well as those out to perform specific tasks for the clan (assassination, theft, kidnaping, etc.).



The Ninja O.C.C.

The Ninja, for the most part, is very different from most other O.C.C.s found in the Palladium game system. All Ninjas receive a basic training by their clan, and their natural talents are honed and focused into a career in which they can establish themselves to maintain a cover or secret identity. In some cases, Ninjas even have two or three separate identities which they can assume to better collect information or to perform a task for their clan. There are even rarer Ninjas who are masters of disguise and can become whomever or whatever they choose!

O.C.C. Abilities:

The Ninja can trade two O.C.C. Related Skills for any special O.C.C. Skill, such as a Horsemanship: Palladin or W.P. Longbow. The Ninja can also, for the cost of 6 O.C.C. Related Skills, take on a magic or psionic discipline (such as all the abilities of a Wizard, Warlock, Shaman, Druid, Priest, Mind Mage, etc., but must have the prerequisites for that O.C.C.), and can effectively hide in that O.C.C. Thus a Ninja spending his 6 O.C.C. Related Skills could take on all the spell casting abilities of a Wizard, and could function as a Wizard in all respects (with the exception being that his O.C.C. and other skills are that of the Ninja O.C.C.). Casting spells, reading scrolls, P.P.E., bonuses to save and learning new magic would all be available to the Wizard/Ninja. This makes for a varied and very powerful network of spies who can fit into just about any profession or group.

Hand to Hand Style

If one prefers to make the Ninja more of a jack-of-all-trades he may stick with Hand to Hand: Martial Arts or Assassin (if an evil alignment) at no change to the current abilities and skills. However, if one wants more of a mystical Ninja (or wants to mimic a Martial Arts Master), the Ninja can trade skills to select a martial art form(s), usually Ninjitsu. For Ninjitsu, the Ninja must trade away 6 O.C.C. Related Skills, plus Hand to Hand: Martial Arts/Assassin, Acrobatics, Climb/Scale Walls, Prowl, Swimming, Disguise, and Imitate Voices/Impersonation. In exchange, he may take the Ninjitsu martial art form as outlined in *Ninjas & Superspies™*, complete with all the skills, martial art powers and bonuses. Taking any one other, less involved martial art form (and mimicking a Martial Arts Master or Warrior Monk) can be done by trading away 6 O.C.C. Related Skills and Hand to Hand: Martial Arts/Assassin. In exchange, they receive one martial art form, including all the bonuses, skills and martial powers as outlined in that form from *Ninjas & Superspies™*.

O.C.C. Skills:

- Language: Native 98%
- Language: Two of choice (+15%).
- Literacy: One of choice (+20%).
- Sign Language (+10%)
- Mathematics: Basic (+5%)
- Climb/Scale Walls (+10%)
- Acrobatics (+10%)
- Prowl (+10%)
- Swimming (+10%)
- Intelligence (+20%)
- Disguise (+15%)
- Imitate Voices/Impersonation (+15%)
- Hand to Hand: Martial Arts/Assassin

O.C.C. Related Skills: Select 10 skills from the following categories at level one, and an additional two at levels three, six, ten and fourteen. Remember, for the cost of two O.C.C. Related Skills, the Ninja can purchase any one O.C.C. specific skill.

- Communication: Any (+10%).
- Cultural/Domestic: Any (+5%).

Espionage: Any (+10%).

Horsemanship: Any, though Knight and Palladin cost 2 skills.

Medical: Any (+5%).

Military: Any (+10%).

Physical: Any (+10%).

Rogue: Any (+10%).

Science: Any (+5%).

Technical: Any (+10%).

Weapon Proficiencies: Any.

Wilderness: Any (+5%).

Secondary Skills: The character can select two Secondary Skills from the above list at levels one. Select another one at levels 3, 6, 9, 12 and 15.

Standard Equipment: If the Ninja takes on the role of another O.C.C., select the standard weapons, armor and equipment as per that O.C.C., plus they will have the following additional pieces of equipment:

Black cloth "ninja" outfit that can double as normal clothes with the hood/mask and gauntlets removed. 2D4 shuriken or other small throwing items, and one weapon of choice, usually a Ninja weapon. They also have 4 emergency kits, which are stashed around the local area where they operate. These kits contain one week's worth of rations (rice, spices and water skin), a small knife, 4 shuriken, an extra set of common clothes, an extra black "ninja" outfit, 50 feet (15.2 m) of rope, fishing line and hooks, bandages, tinderbox and flint, and a small iron pot/bowl for cooking.

Should the Ninja not take on the role of another O.C.C. specifically (i.e. trading 6 O.C.C. Related Skills for a Wizard's abilities or two O.C.C. Related Skills for an O.C.C. specific skill such as Horsemanship: Knight), they have similar equipment to that of a Thief or an Assassin:

Two sets of clothes, cape, cloak or jacket (with many secret pockets 1D6+1), boots or moccasins, pair of soft leather gloves, belt, bedroll, purse, backpack, one large sack, one medium sized sack, three small sacks, water skin, set of skeleton keys, lock pick set, 50 feet (15.2 m) of rope and grappling hook, 1D4+1 wooden or iron spikes, small hammer, pocket mirror and a tinderbox.

Armor: Starts with whatever armor the O.C.C. that they have taken the role of has, or may select soft leather armor (A.R.: 10, S.D.C.: 20).

Weapons: Starts with the typical weapons for the O.C.C. that they have taken the role of, or may select two weapons of normal quality.

Money: The Clan will usually take care of any money needs for emergencies or outfitting the Ninja for special missions, but usually the Ninja is expected to rely on his own income. This also helps in the portrayal of his occupation. Starts with 120 gold.

The Martial Arts Master O.C.C.

The Martial Arts Master is a person who has dedicated his or her life to mastering a particular form (or forms) of combat. Some suggestions for this O.C.C. could be: A master who specializes in mystic (Chi/P.P.E.) combat, all based upon the martial art form(s) that they've learned; a weapons master or swordsman, expert in the use of swords and other blade weapons; a specialist in unarmed combat (taking any of the variety of unarmed combat forms such as Aikido, Te, Karate, etc.); or he could even be a vile assassin killing with Dim Mak or Negative Chi Attacks (negative P.P.E.), poisoning the very souls of his victims. This O.C.C. allows the player to take this kind of open design and run with it, as well as to use some of the more powerful martial art forms offered in *Ninjas & Superspies™* and *Mystic China™*. In all cases, the character is assumed to be part of a cult, monastic order, mystic society, special organization or school that teaches the martial art form(s) that they know. The character could have any number of reasons for studying a martial art form, such as, but not limited to, being a budding monk and deciding that a life of celibacy and rules was too much for him, or perhaps the school that trained him is a closed family dojo. For the creation of this O.C.C. you will need a copy of *Ninjas & Superspies™*, *Mystic China™* and/or *Rifts® Japan*.

Chi and P.P.E.

As mentioned before, the G.M. may decide upon using P.P.E. as THE "life energy" in the game, or he may incorporate Chi as outlined in *Ninjas & Superspies™* and *Mystic China™*. If you are using Chi, follow the rules as outlined in *Ninjas and Superspies™*. To determine P.P.E., take the P.E. of the character, multiply by three and add 1D4 per level to determine the base P.P.E. For a game where P.P.E. is THE "life energy," roll up the Chi as indicated in *Ninjas & Superspies™*, adding in any martial art bonuses or multipliers. Convert one for one from Chi to P.P.E. and add 1D4 per level of experience. Also see the section on *Adapting Martial Art Powers* for using P.P.E. to power the Martial Arts Master's martial art powers.

O.C.C. Abilities:

1. Martial Art Form(s): Select one Martial Art Form from *Ninjas & Superspies™* or *Mystic China™*. If the Master so chooses, he may also select a second martial art form, or select an exclusive form as his primary martial art form, at the cost of half of his Secondary Skills and O.C.C. Related Skills. If the Master is truly dedicated to the perfection of his body, he may select a third martial art form with all of its benefits (or a second if the primary was an exclusive form), but his O.C.C. Related Skills are reduced to none and his Secondary Skills remain at half. With any of the options, take all of the bonuses, special abilities, martial art powers, skills, etc., offered by the various martial art forms. The exception is to exclude any modern skills and/or to switch modern skills for more appropriate *Palladium Fantasy®* skills. In terms of languages offered, for the primary martial art form, treat the associated language as the character's native tongue (no extra Language skill), but for every other martial art form that offers a different language from the primary, he may select one additional Language or Literacy skill. Also note that

the Master must also meet all the requirements for the selected forms.

- 2. Demon Death Blow:** Basically, the same as the Palladin and Warrior Monk. The Martial Arts Master can draw on his inner spirit (Chi or P.P.E.) and channel it through his attacks. The special attack takes 2 actions/attacks to use and costs 1D4 P.P.E./Chi. The attack can only be used against demons, supernatural creatures and creatures of magic. The attack does double damage to these opponents. For creatures who are normally immune to normal attacks, this attack inflicts normal damage (instead of double damage).
- 3. P.P.E.** As outlined above, P.P.E. = Chi plus 1D4 per level of experience, or P.E.x3 +1D4 per level of experience if using Chi and P.P.E.
- 4. Other Bonuses:** +10 S.D.C., +2 to save vs Horror Factor, +1 to save vs Mind Control and Possession.

Alignment: Any, but may depend upon the Martial Art Form selected.

Attribute Requirements: See specific Martial Art Forms for prerequisites.

O.C.C. Skills:

Language: Native Tongue at 98%.

Literacy: One of choice, usually native (+20%).

Language: One of choice (+10%).

Mathematics: Basic (+10%)

Hand to Hand Combat: Use the Martial Art Form(s) from above as the hand to hand style. No others are available.

O.C.C. Related Skills: Select 8 other skills at level one, plus two additional skills at levels four, eight and twelve.

Communication: Any (+10%).

Cultural/Domestic: Any (+10%).

Espionage: Any (+5%).

Horsemanship: General and Exotic Only.

Medical: Any (+5%).

Military: Any.

Physical: Any (+5%).

Rogue: Any (+5%).

Science: Any.

Technical: Any (+10%).

Weapon Proficiencies: None, only those offered by the Martial Art Form.

Wilderness: Any.

Secondary Skills: The character can select four Secondary Skills from the above list. At levels two, five, seven and ten the Master can select an additional two skills.

Standard Equipment: A set of traveling clothes, a cloak or robe, sandals or moccasins, belt, bedroll, backpack, a medium-sized to large purse/satchel, four small sacks, a water skin, 50 feet (15.2 m) of rope and grappling hook, small mirror, tinderbox, and food rations for 2D4 weeks.

Armor: Starts with none. Most prefer to rely on their martial art training (and body hardening), but some may acquire and use up to a full suit of chain mail or any half suit of heavy armor (such as Zanjī Shinjinken Ryu and Ch'a Ch'uan Kung Fu).

The penalties for the type of armor depend on the G.M. and his thoughts on the type of martial art form. With general forms that don't use weapons, or very few weapons (fewer than three), use the non man-at-arms penalties, otherwise use the normal man-at-arms penalties.

Weapons: Starts with one weapon for each of his weapon katas (or a dozen if targeting, or a bow and two dozen arrows for archery) up to a maximum of five weapons. All are basic S.D.C. weapons. If the Master has no weapon katas he starts with no weapons.

Money: Starts with 110 gold.

Oriental Clergy Warrior Monk O.C.C. (Optional Expansion)

The Warrior Monk as outlined in the main book of the Second Edition of the *Palladium Fantasy RPG*® is quite appropriate if one wishes to simply choose a generic monk to use with their campaign. However, should one wish to further explore the martial art aspect, this optional O.C.C. will allow one to do so. In addition to the information below, one will also need a copy of *Ninjas & Superspies*™, *Mystic China*™ and/or *Rifts*® *Japan*.

Chi and P.P.E.

As mentioned before, the G.M. may decide upon using P.P.E. as THE "life energy" in the game, or he may incorporate Chi as outlined in *Ninjas & Superspies*™ and *Mystic China*™. If you are using Chi, follow the rules as outlined in *Ninjas & Superspies*™. To determine P.P.E., take the P.E. of the character, multiply by three, and add 1D4 per level to determine his base P.P.E. For a game where P.P.E. is THE "life energy," roll up the Chi as indicated in *Ninjas & Superspies*™, adding in any martial art bonuses or multipliers. Convert Chi one for one to P.P.E. and add 1D4 per level of experience. Also see section on *Adapting Martial Art Powers* for using P.P.E. to power the Monk's martial art powers.

O.C.C. Abilities:

- 1. Spirit Strike:** Basically the same as the Palladin's and Samurai's Demon Death Blow. The Warrior Monk can draw on his inner spirit (Chi or P.P.E.) and channel it through his attacks. The special attack uses 2 actions/attacks and costs 1D6 P.P.E./Chi. The attack can only be used against demons, supernatural creatures and creatures of magic. The attack does triple damage to these opponents. For creatures that are immune to normal attacks, this attack inflicts only double damage.
- 2. Permanent P.P.E. Base:** See above for details, but basically P.P.E. = Chi +1D4 per level of experience, or P.E.x3 +1D4 per level of experience if using Chi and P.P.E.
- 3. Other Bonuses:** +20 S.D.C. +1 to save vs Horror Factor at levels 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 13 and 15, +1 to save vs disease, +1 to save vs illusion and mind control, +4 to save vs possession.
- 4. Martial Arts Forms:** Select one Martial Art Form from

Ninjas & Superspies™ or **Mystic China™**. Take all bonuses, special abilities, martial art powers, skills, etc. The exception is to exclude any modern skills or to switch such skills for more appropriate skills. Also note that the Warrior Monk must also meet all the requirements for that Form.

Alignment: Any alignment, though 25% are Principled, 25% Scrupulous, 15% Anarchist, 15% Aberrant and 20% other.

Attribute Requirements: P.P. 11 and P.E. 11 or higher. A high P.S., M.E. and M.A. are helpful but not required.

O.C.C. Skills:

Language: Native Tongue at 98% and two other languages of choice (+20%).

Literacy: One of choice (+15%).

Mathematics: Basic (+20%)

Lore: Demon & Monster (+15%)

Lore: Religion (+20%)

Play Musical Instrument: One of choice (+20%).

No Hand to Hand Combat: Use the martial art form from above as the hand to hand style, no others are available.

O.C.C. Related Skills: Select 5 other skills at level one, plus two additional skills at levels four, eight and twelve.

Communication: Any (+5%).

Cultural/Domestic: Any (+15%).

Espionage: Any.

Horsemanship: None, walks or rides in a wagon.

Medical: Any (+5%).

Military: None.

Physical: Any except Acrobatics, Gymnastics, Boxing and Wrestling unless part of the martial art form.

Rogue: Any.

Science: Any.

Technical: Any (+10%).

Weapon Proficiencies: None, only those offered by the martial art form.

Wilderness: Any.

Secondary Skills: The character can select four Secondary Skills from the above list. At levels two, five, seven and ten the Monk can select an additional two skills.

Standard Equipment: A set of traveling clothes, a dark traveling robe with a hood (typically brown or gray), a ceremonial robe, sandals or moccasins, belt, bedroll, backpack, a medium sized to large purse/satchel, four small sacks, a water skin, one or two holy symbols, wooden cross, six wooden stakes, a small mallet, 30 feet (9.1 m) of rope, 1D6 vials of holy water, small mirror, tinderbox, and food rations for 2D4 weeks.

Armor: Starts with none. Most rely on their martial art training (and body hardening), but some may acquire and use up to chain mail. The penalties for the type of armor depend on the martial art form. Forms that don't use weapons, or very few weapons (fewer than three), use the non man-at-arms penalties; otherwise, use the normal man-at-arms penalties.

Weapons: Depending upon martial art form, he usually starts with a good quality staff or a weapon to match his weapon kata of choice. However, those without a weapon kata usu-

ally have no weapons, though some might have a simple walking stick. They also have a dagger and/or a hatchet for practical use (eating and chopping firewood). In either case, all are basic S.D.C. weapons.

Money: Starts with 110 gold.

Other Optional O.C.C.s

Note on Equipment

Take the equivalent fantasy items (switching to non-magical) and omit or switch for the appropriate fantasy equivalent. Any special items should be approved by the G.M. Also see **Ninjas & Superspies™** or **Mystic China™** for a variety of Oriental style weapons.

Oriental Monsters and Treasure

Take a look at **Mystic China™** and **Rifts® Japan** for several interesting monsters, Oni/Infernals and dragons that can be easily used in (or converted to) the **Palladium Fantasy®** setting. As a quick rule of thumb for converting from **Rifts® Japan**, simply take the M.D.C. and change one for one to S.D.C. For Hit Points take the total M.D.C. and divide by two. Damage inflicted is now S.D.C., not M.D. One can also find a plethora of magic weapons, armor and items, as well as spells and magic, in **Rifts® Japan** and **Mystic China™** that can be easily adapted to your **Palladium Fantasy RPG®** campaign.

Available Rifts® Japan O.C.C.s

Due to the traditional outlook of the post-apocalyptic peoples of **Rifts® Japan** towards technology, most of those O.C.C.s can be brought over with few alterations. The only changes required are M.D.C. to S.D.C. conversion, switching of modern skills to **Palladium Fantasy®** equivalents, and adjustment of equipment (usually removal of magical and high-tech items and replacement with fantasy equivalents where possible).

Palladium Fantasy RPG® Skill Availability for Rifts® Japan O.C.C.s

Communication: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

Domestic: Make selections from Domestic, Communication & Performing Arts, Cultural, and Temple Philosophy.

Electrical: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

Espionage: Make selections from Espionage.

Mechanical: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

Military: Make selections from Espionage.

Medical: Make selections from Medical.

Physical: Make selections from Physical.

Pilot Skill: Bonuses can be applied to Horsemanship: General and Exotic, and Sailing only.

Pilot Related Skills: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

Rogue: Make selections from Rogue and Chinese Swindler Espionage.

Science: Make selections from Science.

Technical: Make selections from Scholar, Noble & Technical or Communication & Performing Arts, Chinese Cultural and Games.

Weapon Proficiencies: Make selections from Ancient W.P.s only.

Wilderness: Make selections from Wilderness.

Non-Oriental O.C.C.s Skill Note

Other Palladium Fantasy® O.C.C.s may select any of the Cultural and Temple Philosophy skills as outlined in *Rifts® Japan* or their equivalents from *Ninjas & Superspies™*. For these skills use the Domestic bonuses (if any).

Hand to Hand Style Note

The martial art specific hand to hand styles of Basic Martial Arts/Judo, Aikido, Jujitsu, Karate and Kendo can be made available to any of the new Oriental O.C.C.s or offered to almost any other O.C.C. for characters who are raised in the Orient. The cost for these extended martial arts are as follows: After purchasing Hand to Hand: Martial Arts Basic Martial Arts/Judo or Kendo costs one O.C.C. Related Skill. Aikido, Jujitsu, or Karate costs two other skills. The new Ninja O.C.C. presented here may upgrade Martial Arts/Assassin to Hand to Hand: Ninjitsu at the cost of one other skill.

Bishamon Fighting Monk

Chi-Gung Mega-Damage Skin becomes Chi-Gung Body Hardening Martial Arts Ability. Chi M.D. Death Blow gets converted to the Warrior Monk's Spirit Strike. Skills are pretty much unchanged, as the Monk already has a no-tech outlook. Use the *Rifts®* skill categories above to select skills from the appropriate Palladium Fantasy categories. The character may also select Mystic Herbology (see *Rifts® England*) as outlined for the Monk. Also replace the Millennium Tree staff with an ordinary staff. At the G.M.'s discretion the character can switch his Hand to Hand: Aikido for the Martial Art Form of Aikido as presented in *Ninjas & Superspies™*. If this option is selected remove all W.P.s, the Oriental Philosophy skill selection, Play Musical Instrument and mystic martial art powers. Take the cultural skills, martial art powers and combat bonuses offered by the Martial Art Form. Also, since the form has no W.P.s, the Monk does not use/have a staff. See the section on P.P.E. and Chi to determine the Monk's new P.P.E. and Chi (if applicable). Starting gold is 120.

Sohei Warrior Monk & Nuns

Chi M.D. Death Blow gets converted to the Warrior Monk's Spirit Strike. Skills are pretty much unchanged, as the Monk/Nun already has a no-tech outlook. Use the *Rifts®* skill categories above to select skills from the appropriate Palladium Fantasy categories. Also, replace the Millennium Tree staff with an ordinary staff. At the G.M.'s discretion the character can switch his Hand to Hand: Jujitsu for the Martial Art form of Ju-



jutsu as presented in **Ninjas & Superspies™**. If this option is selected, remove all W.P.s, the Mystic Martial Art Powers and Jodo, The Way of the Staff. The Monk/Nun also loses his or her staff. Starting gold is 100.

Yamabushi Mountain Priest

The Power of Stone is changed to 60 S.D.C. and an A.R. of 16. Each additional stone adds 60 S.D.C. up to a maximum of 600. Chi M.D. Death Blow gets converted to the Warrior Monk's Spirit Strike. Skills are pretty much unchanged, as the Priest already has a no-tech outlook. Use the **Rifts®** skill categories above to select skills from the appropriate Palladium Fantasy categories. Starting gold is 100.

Demon Queller

Substitute all Mystic Body Hardening Exercises with the S.D.C. versions from **Ninjas & Superspies™**. Chi M.D. Death Blow gets converted to the Palladin's Demon Death Blow. For skills, use the **Rifts®** skill categories above to select skills from the appropriate Palladium Fantasy categories. The Demon Queller may use any type of armor, though many prefer to rely solely on their martial art abilities. Starting gold is 200.

Tengu

The Tengu may be a little too powerful for a typical **Palladium Fantasy®** campaign and their inclusion into a G.M.'s world is solely up to them. If included, the Tengu has 3D4x10 S.D.C. and Hit Points are P.E. +2D6 per level. All other references to M.D.C. should be changed to S.D.C. Use the **Rifts®** skill categories above to select skills from the appropriate Palladium Fantasy categories.

Available Mystic China™ O.C.C.s

As with **Rifts® Japan**, **Mystic China™** is also easily adapted to **Palladium Fantasy®**. The major changes of note are switching modern skills to Palladium Fantasy equivalents (and/or removing irrelevant skills) and adjustment of equipment to fit into a fantasy environment (removal of modern weapons and gear and switching to fantasy equivalents).

Mystic China™ Skill Note: Change the Chinese Classical Studies skill to the Classical Studies of another language (i.e. Southern Classical Studies or Elven Classical Studies). Use the books outlined under the skill's description as a guideline (or template) for the new Classical Studies. This also applies to other Chinese specific skills such as Chinese Antiquarianism, Chinese Mythology, Chinese Stage Literacy, Chinese and Calligraphic Code & Code Breaking. The Chinese Alchemist skill should probably be ignored unless you plan to incorporate an Alchemist or Tinkerer into your campaign. (See **The Rifter® #10: The Science of Palladium Fantasy** for my **Tinkerer O.C.C.** and the melding of technology into a fantasy setting.)

Mystic China™ O.C.C. Skill Availability from Palladium Fantasy®

Communication: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

Computer: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

Cultural/Domestic: Make selections from Domestic or Communication & Performing Arts.

Electrical: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

Espionage: Make selections from Espionage and Wilderness.

Mechanical: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

Military: Make selections from Espionage.

Medical: Make selections from Medical; in most cases it will be either First Aid or Holistic.

Physical: Make selections from Physical.

Pilot, Basic: Bonuses can be applied to Horsemanship: General and Exotic, and Sailing only.

Pilot, Advanced: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

Pilot Related Skills: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

Science: Make selections from Science.

Swindler: Make selections from Rogue or Chinese Swindler Espionage.

Technical: Make selections from Scholar, Noble & Technical or Communication & Performing Arts.

Temple: Make selections from Temple Philosophies.

W.P. Ancient: Make selections from W.P.s.

W.P. Modern: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

W.P. Military: Ignore any bonuses or available skills.

Non-Oriental O.C.C. Skill Note

Other **Palladium Fantasy®** O.C.C.s may select any of the skills as outlined in **Mystic China™** with the approval of the G.M. The restrictions on the skills should be as follows: Cultural and Temple Philosophy skills use the Domestic bonuses (if any), Chinese Cultural and Games use the Technical bonuses (if any). Chinese Swindler Espionage skills are available only to O.C.C.s with access to Rogue skills. Use the Rogue bonuses (if any).

Philosopher Martial Artist

Ignore all references to modern skills, removing Radio: Basic, Paramedic, and W.P. Modern: One of choice. These skills may be traded for First Aid and one Ancient W.P. of choice. Chinese History becomes the History skill from **Palladium Fantasy®**. Use the general skill layout and availability as indicated above. Starting gold is 140.

Demon Hunter

Basically unchanged. Use the general skill layout and availability as indicated above. Optionally, instead of using the Demon Hunter combat abilities and level advancements, the G.M. may opt to offer one martial art form in its place (most likely one that offers Demon Hunter Body Hardening Exercises). Starting gold is 100.

Weapon-Based Martial Artist

Ignore all references to modern skills, replacing Paramedic with First Aid. Use the general skill layout and availability as

indicated above. Also, the option to take Triad Assassin training should be ignored. The option to take Zanji Shinjinken-Ryu is still permissible, it just means that the Martial Artist is a master of swords. This may cause certain problems when dealing with Samurai as they would see the character's use of weapons (especially if they are supposed to be part of the empire's caste system) an affront to their authority and the law. Starting gold is 120.

Meditative Martial Artist

Ignore all references to modern skills, use the general skill layout and availability as indicated above. Starting gold is 3D6 pieces.

Open Hand Martial Artist

Ignore all references to modern skills, replacing Paramedic with First Aid and removing Bicycle. Use the general skill layout and availability as indicated above. Starting gold is 50.

Antiquarian and Capitalist Entrepreneur

These O.C.C.s are not well suited for a fantasy style game and should be omitted.

Fox Spirit

The Fox Sprit may be a little too powerful for a typical **Palladium Fantasy**® campaign and their inclusion into a G.M.'s world is solely up to them. If they are used, use the general skill layout and availability as indicated above.

Reformed Demon

As with the Fox Spirit, the Reformed Demon may be a little too powerful for a typical **Palladium Fantasy**® campaign and their inclusion into a G.M.'s world is solely up to them. If they are used, use the general skill layout and availability as indicated above.

Blind Mystic

Ignore all references to modern skills, use the general skill layout and availability as indicated above, take note of the Blind Mystic's limitations due to blindness on modern skills as they pertain to similar Fantasy skills. Starting gold is 100. They should also be able to easily pick up money as a beggar.

Geomancer

Ignore all references to modern skills, use the general skill layout and availability as indicated above. As the Palladium world is a lot more potent with magic than that of **Mystic China**™, a few changes to the magic abilities of the Geomancer need to be addressed. Due to the fact that the Geomancer's main focus is on the manipulation and control of ambient Chi/P.P.E., they do not readily build up a huge reserve of P.P.E. as other mages. As such, their base P.P.E. has only increased slightly. Base P.P.E. is now P.E. +3D6, +1D6 every third level of experience (levels 3, 6, 9, 12 and 15). The Geomancer is, however, more in tune with the Dragon Lines (Ley Lines) of the Palladium World and possesses the Wizard's abilities of See and Use Ley Lines (double the amount of available P.P.E. and sensing range), Ley Line Rejuvenation and Ley Line Drift. At the discretion of the G.M. the Geomancer can also learn and use con-

ventional magic spells. They initially start out with none and must learn magic in the normal fashion that a Wizard does. In the event that the G.M. is using just P.P.E. and not Chi, add the Chi total (P.E. + Martial Art and/or O.C.C. bonuses) to the Base P.P.E. listed above to provide the total P.P.E. Starting gold is 160.

Immortalist

Ignore all references to modern skills, removing Radio: Basic and W.P. (Modern): One of choice. Do not replace with a **Palladium Fantasy**® equivalent. Replace Chinese History with the History skill. Otherwise use the general skill layout and availability as indicated above. As the Palladium World is a lot more potent with magic than that of **Mystic China**™, a few changes to the magic abilities of the Immortalist need to be addressed. The Immortalist's abilities with Celestial Calligraphy are more akin to the Diabolist's wards rather than conventional spell casting. However, at the G.M.'s discretion, the Immortalist can convert certain conventional spells through researching written magic, but can not cast spells in the normal sense as a Wizard. Base P.P.E. is now 1D6x10 +P.E., +1D6 per level. The Immortalist isn't as in tune with Dragon Lines (Ley Lines) as Geomancers, but is familiar enough with them that he can draw upon them like other mages, so he only receives the Wizard's abilities of See and Use Ley Lines. In the event that the G.M. is using just P.P.E. and not Chi, add the Chi total (P.E. + Martial Art and/or O.C.C. bonuses) to the Base P.P.E. listed above to provide the total P.P.E. Starting gold is 130.

Chi Arcanist

Ignore all references to modern skills, use the general skill layout and availability as indicated above. As the Palladium World is a lot more potent with magic than that of **Mystic China**™, a few changes to the magic abilities of the Chi Arcanist need to be addressed. Of all the **Mystic China**™ Men of Magic, the Chi Arcanist is the closest to a conventional Wizard. Base P.P.E. is now 2D4x10 +P.E., +1D6 per level of experience. They also possess the Wizard's abilities of See and Use Ley Lines as well as Ley Line Rejuvenation. They can also learn and use conventional magic spells, but do not start out with any. In the event that the G.M. is using just P.P.E. and not Chi, add the Chi total (P.E. +Martial Art and/or O.C.C. bonuses) to the Base P.P.E. listed above to provide the total P.P.E. Starting gold is 130.

Adventures

Way of the Samurai

Scenario Outline

This adventure is a good way to get conventional fantasy characters involved in an Oriental adventure, or simply useful as a good Oriental adventure.

This adventure is best for four to six, low to mid-level characters, and both Oriental and non-Oriental O.C.C.s will work well. Reduce the number and levels of the NPCs if there are fewer player characters.

Hook: The characters stumble upon a royal entourage that seems to have been attacked by Orcish raiders. A carriage is on fire, half the horses have been slain. Royal guards and Samurai lay scattered about the battlefield, dead. A man half clad in Samurai body armor kneels before the burning coach. He seems to be deep in contemplation or meditation. He'll quickly detect the characters (Chi Awareness) as soon as they walk onto the battlefield and stand, ready to fight. He holds a tanto (knife) in his hand and draws a katana (long sword) with the other. His face is weary and worn and it looks as though he has been crying and has tried to hide it.

Once he realizes the characters are not raiders, he'll hang his head in shame. Slumping his shoulders and lowering his weapons, he says, "I am now masterless, Ronin..."

If any in the group ask what happened (or are unfamiliar with the term "Ronin"), he says that he went to deliver a message for his master, and upon his return he found his master and his family's coach burned and all his guards slain. If the group looks to be foreigners he tells them a bit about the life of a Samurai and how they need a master to follow, for without a master there can be no honor, and without honor he is Ronin and despised.

Line: The group, after searching through what remains, learns that a boy has escaped (small footprints fleeing the scene). The Samurai is ecstatic (hoping that it is the young Prince). Several sets of tracks lead into the wood as well, suggesting that the boy was followed. The Samurai (who is now calling himself a Ronin) insists that he still has a chance to save face and restore his honor if he can save the young Prince and continue service in his house.

They find the Prince being interrogated by seven men, one looks like a Wizard clad in gray and black, the others look like Ronin (no distinguishing markings on their armor, no helmet and are all self decorated in such things as bandanas, beads, horse hair/plumes and body parts of victims). The Samurai leaps to the aid of the Prince and hopefully the group will follow.

The Ronin will try and hold the group off while their leader tries to flee. Once he is out of sight he'll cast some magic to help them in their getaway.

Sinker: After the battle, the Prince indicates that he thinks the thugs were hired to kill him and his family. His father dead, he is the rightful heir to his father's Province. The six Ronin and the Wizard were looking for the Blades of Kinkaro (the three blades owned by Gyoko Kinkaro and his fathers before him, a symbol of the leadership of the Prince's house, whoever has them rules the Province).

If any of the bandits survive but do not escape, they may get a brief chance to interrogate them. Brief because in 1D6 minutes, the other members will try a rescue. If it fails, they will kill their own men so the group cannot get any information out of their captives. If anyone interrogates the bandits or the Prince puts things together, they will realize that the Prince's uncle is behind the murders and that perhaps hundreds of men are likely in the area looking to kill the Prince for a bounty! The group must flee the area and help restore the Prince's rightful place. He promises a substantial reward to all who help him!

The Blades of Kinkaro

These are three blades; a katana (long sword), wakizashi (short sword) and tanto (knife), that are the symbol of the ruling leader of the Kinkaro House. Who ever possess all three is legally considered the ruler of the house. In the case of their absence, the next closest heir takes command of the Province. Besides the young Prince there is only his uncle, Baird Kinkaro. With the Prince gone (and presumed killed with the others), Baird Kinkaro takes leadership of the Province. The location of the blades was kept a secret to keep Uncle Baird from finding them. Uncle Baird assumed that Gyoko would keep them on him, as they are very powerful weapons. Unfortunately for him, that was only partially true. Gyoko kept the tanto with him but gave it to his son to escape with. The six Ronin and the Wizard were able to retrieve it when the Prince tried to hide it. (Very difficult to hide a magic item in the bushes when a Wizard can sense it). The Ronin were unable to interrogate the young Prince before the group found them, so they will try again later to acquire the locations of the two missing swords. They also hope that the Prince will try and find them to take claim over his uncle, and thus lead them to their location. If that fails, they will try and recapture the Prince to get the information out of him.

The other two blades are located in a small shrine guarded by four Warrior Monks just on the outskirts of Gyoko's fortified castle (from which Baird Kinkaro now rules). The shrine is part of a small monastery that Gyoko would secretly steal away to for times of rest, to decide upon important issues of state, or to use the swords.

Katana of Kinkaro

A magnificent blade, just like its two smaller brothers it is ornately crafted, with a jade and copper handle carved in the fashion of an Oriental dragon. Damage: 5D6. Bonuses: +2 to strike and parry. Special Features: The blade does double damage to supernatural and magical creatures.

Wakizashi of Kinkaro

A magnificent blade in its own right, just like its two other brothers, it is ornately crafted with a jade and copper handle carved in the fashion of an Oriental dragon. Damage: 4D6. Bonus: +2 to strike and parry. Special Features: While wielding/holding the weapon the wearer is impervious to fire (including magical fire and dragon's breath).

Tanto of Kinkaro

A magnificent blade, just like its two larger brothers it is ornately crafted, with a jade and copper handle carved in the fashion of an Oriental dragon. Damage: 3D6. Bonus: +2 to strike, parry and throw. Special Features: The weapon returns when thrown. Maximum Range: 200 feet (61 m).

Non-Player Characters

Yukido Tamashi, Messenger/Herald of the Royal House of Kinkaro 2nd Level Samurai

Yukido is a brave young man, though still in need of some practical experience when it comes to politics and real combat.

He comes from a long line of scholars and Wizards. Yukido sincerely cares for his master (and his family). He is a slim fellow of southern/Oriental descent, and has long black hair in a pulled up ponytail (as is typical of most samurai).

Alignment: Principled.

Attributes: I.Q. 15, M.E. 15, M.A. 12, P.S. 20, P.P. 18, P.E. 16, P.B. 9, Spd. 12.

Hit Points: 25. **S.D.C.:** 45.

P.P.E.: 41

Attacks Per Melee: Four.

Bonuses: +2 on initiative (+3 with a sword), +2 to strike, +2 to parry (+4 with a sword or staff), +5 to dodge, +4 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +5 to pull punch, +7 damage, +1 to save vs Horror Factor, +1 to save vs mind control.

Weapons: Possesses his family swords, a katana, 3D6, wakizashi, 2D6, and a tanto, 1D6, all are +1 to strike and parry. He had a bow and arrows, but has lost them in the chase. He may or may not pick up a replacement depending upon the situation and whether or not he can salvage another set.

Armor: He is outfitted in a half suit of plate mail (Oriental/Samurai styled). A.R.: 17, S.D.C.: 160.

Magic Items: None.

Other Equipment: Next to nothing, except a bit of gold (36 gold). Lost most of it during the battle fighting off bandits.

Skills of Note: Hand to Hand: Zanji Shinjinken Ryu, as well as all the usual Samurai skills, plus he speaks Western, Southern, Elven and Gobblely. He is also knowledgeable in the Monster and Faerie Lore.

Prince Miamato Kinkaro, Son and Only Heir to Warlord Gyoko Kinkaro 1st Level Noble

Though still an adolescent, Prince Miamato has fortunately been able to spend a great deal of time with his father, learning the ways of the Samurai as well as learning to govern the land and the people they protect and care for. In time, he will become a great and respected leader. The young Prince is also said to be blessed, mostly from the fact that he has jade colored eyes (a rare thing among the people of the Empire), which may explain how he's been able to stay alive this long.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Attributes: I.Q. 12, M.E. 17, M.A. 20, P.S. 5, P.P. 12, P.E. 9, P.B. 9, Spd. 10.

Hit Points: 12. **S.D.C.:** 12.

Attacks Per Melee: Four.

Bonuses: +2 on initiative (+4 with a sword), +2 to strike, +3 to parry, +4 to dodge, +6 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +3 to pull punch.

Weapons: Currently none.

Armor: Currently none.

Magic Items: His father gave him a magical amulet that allows him to turn invisible for 10 minutes, 3 times per day in the event that he needs to flee/escape an assassination attempt on his life or his family's. Smart thinking on his father's part!

Other Equipment: Next to nothing.

Skills of Note: The young Prince has studied the ways of the Samurai (knows Horsemanship: Knight, and has Hand to Hand: Zanji Shinjiken Ryu). He is also well versed in politics and speaks Eastern, Western, Southern and Elven.

Warlord Baird Kinkaro, New Leader of the Kinkaro Province 9th Level Samurai

Once a great man of respect and honor like his brother, but over time a resentment of his brother, greed and lust for power have turned his heart black and made him a very dangerous man (especially to his brother and his family). He consorts with dark forces that have only helped to fuel his lust and greed. Baird is a short fellow like his brother, but sports a small mustache and goatee.

Alignment: Miscreant (was Aberrant).

Attributes: I.Q. 15, M.E. 21, M.A. 18, P.S. 22, P.P. 22, P.E. 26, P.B. 7 (scar on face), Spd. 12.

Hit Points: 58. **S.D.C.:** 85.

Martial Art Form: Zanji Shinjinken Ryu.

Attacks Per Melee: Nine.

Bonuses: Always has initiative (martial art power of Awareness), +10 to strike, +6 to parry, +5 to dodge, +3 to roll with punch/fall/impact.

Martial Art Powers: Martial Arts Awareness, Stone Ox, Dam Sum Sing, Chi Mastery, Chi Awareness, Chi Relaxation, Dragon Chi, and Body Chi.

Weapons: As the ruler of the Kinkaro Province he has access to just about any weapon he could want, with the exception of the Kinkaro Blades (which he is desperately seeking, so he can legally claim the Province as his own). Currently he uses a high quality set of daisho. The katana does 3D6+3 damage and wakizashi 2D6+3, and both are +2 to strike and parry.

Armor: Usually wears none unless he is planning to go into combat. But he always wears a ring of protection (Armor of Ithan, 30 minutes, 3 times per day) in the event of an assassination attempt.

Magic Items: As stated above, he has a magical ring that protects him with Armor of Ithan. He also has a magical suit of scale mail called the Dragon's Scales (Oriental style with pictures and patterns of Oriental dragons carved into it). A.R.: 16, S.D.C.: 200. The wearer can transform into dragon mist (Metamorphosis: Mist) 2 times per day for 30 minutes.

Other Equipment: Anything he needs, as he is now the ruler of the Kinkaro Province.

Skills of Note: As a dedicated martial artist he has nearly mastered the martial art form of Zanji Shinjinken Ryu. He also has all the skills of that martial art form. The remainder of his skills are focused on politics and espionage, such as Card Shark, Seduction, Pick Locks, Palming, Pick Pockets, Use & Recognize Poison, Interrogation Techniques and Intelligence.

Warlord Baird's Hired Thugs

Unknown to the rest of his family, Warlord Baird has access to the Shadowfist Ninja Clan. He has been using them for several years now to help solidify his power base and eventually take over his brother's Province. The leader of the "gang," known only as the Gray Master, works for him and is a Ninja trained in the mystic arts as a Wizard (making him quite a powerful and valuable ally). Under his command is a group of six Ninja Ronin, all very deadly and experts in combat. For tough assignments the Gray Master often summons Shadow Beasts, Tectonic Entities and Possessing Entities to soften up their enemies before he and his Ronin finish them off. In the assassination of Warlord Gyoko Kinkaro, they were unaware that the young Prince had an amulet of invisibility and could not find him in the initial assault to kill him. It was only through the Gray Master's magic that they were able to track him down.

The Gray Master — 7th Level Ninja

A strange, elderly fellow who wears a gray cloak and robe with black trim and undergarments. He is bald but sports a gray goatee and mustache. The Gray Master is also a master of manipulation, and he likes to use others to work certain ends of a situation to help aid or solidify his position or to accomplish a mission. In the attack on Gyoko Kinkaro he used a band of Orcish raiders to deal with the Samurai and royal guard, making it look like simple bandits attacked them. This was to draw suspicion away from him while he and his Ronin personally murdered Warlord Gyoko and his family. When they discovered the young Prince had managed to flee the carnage, they set off to track him down.

Alignment: Aberrant.

Attributes: I.Q. 19, M.E. 22, M.A. 20, P.S. 15, P.P. 17, P.E. 20, P.B. 12, Spd. 13.

Hit Points: 46. S.D.C.: 19.

P.P.E.: 174

Hand to Hand: Assassin.

Attacks Per Melee: Six.

Bonuses: +2 on initiative, +3 to strike, +4 to parry, +4 to dodge, +6 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +3 to pull punch, knock out/stun on a natural 17-20.

Weapons: Carries a staff and several throwing weapons like shuriken, daggers, and darts (some poisoned).

Armor: A magical cloak of armor (gray in color). A.R.: 14, S.D.C.: 50.

Magic Items: He has several scrolls, a ring of Shadow Beast summoning (2 times per day) and a ring of Metamorphosis: Animal (30 minutes, 2 times per day).

Other Equipment: Anything he needs comes from his employer, Warlord Baird, or his Ninja Clan.

Skills of Note: Formally trained as a Ninja, he also has all the skills, powers and abilities of a Wizard of the same level, including several spells.

Magic Knowledge: Equal to a 7th level Wizard. Spells focus mostly on deception and assassination, such as Invisibility, Shadow Meld, Metamorphosis: Mist, Metamorphosis: Human, Metamorphosis: Animal, Summon Shadow Beast, and

Summon & Control Entity. Feel free to add or adjust his repertoire of spells.



The Six Ninja Ronin

5th level Ninjas

Alignment: Aberrant.

Average Attributes for All Six: I.Q. 11, M.E. 18, M.A. 13, P.S. 21, P.P. 22, P.E. 14, P.B. 10, Spd. 15.

Hit Points: 35. S.D.C.: 60.

P.P.E.: 52

Hand to Hand: Zanji Shinjinken Ryu.

Attacks Per Melee: Six, plus one while using a sword.

Bonuses: +3 on initiative (+4 with a sword), +5 to strike, +5 to parry (+7 with a sword or staff), +7 to dodge, +6 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +5 to pull punch, +4 to save vs Horror Factor, +1 to save vs mind control.

Weapons: Each carries a set of daisho, longbow with two dozen arrows and one other weapon of choice.

Armor: Each wears a magical (noiseless) suit of chain mail. A.R.: 14, S.D.C.: 100.

Magic Items: None, other than armor.

Other Equipment: Anything they need comes from their employer, Warlord Baird, or their Ninja Clan. All are equipped with horses.

Skills of Note: Formally trained as Ninjas, they have all opted to learn the ways of the Samurai and master the martial art

form of ZANJI Shinjiken Ryu as well as learning Horsemanship: Knight. Though they are currently employed by Warlord Baird and have the Shadowfist Ninja Clan as their true master, they prefer to keep with the appearance that they are mercenaries/Ronin. They may assume the role of Samurai if it is deemed necessary for a mission or to gain information.

Kung Fu Fighting

Scenario Outline

This adventure is perfect for Monks, Martial Arts Masters and just about anyone else with a martial art form. It is also good for any warrior types who just want to get out and do some brawling.

Hook: The characters either receive a personal invitation, or hear about a tournament for the Golden Serpent. Any Martial Arts Master in the group will be familiar with the tournament and know something about it. The G.M. may also decide to have them meet up with Cobdin, a drunkard at the local tavern who claims to know about this tournament and has been bragging about it for several weeks in the tavern. Legend has it that every ten years a tournament for the Golden Serpent has been held somewhere in the South. The rumored location for this year's tournament is the island of East Mnn in the Floenry Islands. The players find out that three ancient pyramids on the islands have been unearthed and the tournament is being held at the valley floor between the three pyramids.

Line: The legends are a little conflicting on what the Golden Serpent is. Some say the Golden Serpent is a powerful artifact that can grant longevity, or possibly even immortality. Others say that it is a living, golden-colored magical serpent that grants a gift to the winner of the tournament. Other say it's just a golden statue one takes home as the prize. In any case, the winner of the tournament is showered in wealth, power and, of course, the prestige of being the best fighter in all the lands.

Sinker: The Golden Serpent is actually an amulet in the shape of a serpent, which is a prison for a powerful Wizard. The amulet consists of a serpent coiled and entwined around itself and looks to be made of gold with emerald eyes. It is about 2 inches (5 cm) in height and is worn around the neck on a gold chain. The Wizard inside actually trapped himself there by accident. He was trying to create a method of bestowing immortality upon himself, and ended up trapping his life force inside the amulet. He found that he could still control his body, though, as well as the body of anyone else who wore the amulet with his life force trapped in it. His original body passed away a millennium ago. But each new body that wore the amulet fell under his influence.

Also as a distraction or additional fun for the G.M., a large tribe of Grimbor have been displaced from their home (the pyramids). Originally frightened off by tournament organizers, they return during the night with others, sneaking onto the tournament grounds, slaying as many as they can quietly, then retreating into the forest when they are discovered.

Non-Player Characters

The Golden Serpent Amulet

The trapped life force of an ancient Wizard resides within the amulet. The Wizard has limited senses (hearing, sight, smell and a little bit of touch, but only feels who/what touches the amulet), can use magic and can even communicate via telepathy (140 feet/42.6 m) or through a voice that emanates from the amulet. He can ride along with his host around their neck, using magic to aid them and allowing them to function on their own (under his orders, of course). He can also take complete control of the host body and use it as his own with complete senses, and intuitively knows how to use any natural abilities of the body (but not skills or magical knowledge).

Statistics:

A.R.: 15, **S.D.C.:** 200 (if someone actually targets the amulet and tries to destroy it). The amulet is also impervious to fire and regenerates any damage at a rate of 1D6 S.D.C. per day.

Powers of the Amulet:

Anyone wearing the amulet is instantly forced into a battle of wills with the Wizard inside, like a Summoner's battle of wills. Take the M.E. bonuses of the Wizard and the host, roll 1D20 each and add the M.E. bonus, higher roll wins, defender/host wins ties. If the host loses he must obey the Wizard as per the Summoner's control over his summoned creatures. Over time (usually within 5 to 10 years) the host will be completely broken by the Wizard's will so that he obeys anything and everything the Wizard orders without question. A new battle of wills takes place whenever the Wizard changes control levels (possession vs suggestion), or when the host is ordered to do something completely against his alignment (such as kill a loved one, commit suicide, etc.). For every 10 battles lost, the host is -1 to save vs the battle of wills. Once it becomes impossible for the host to win (unless a natural 20 is rolled), the host is completely subservient. A G.M. may decide that he may try to fight after this to save a friend, loved one or his own life, but a natural 20 will be needed to break free.

If the host originally saves on his first battle of wills with the Wizard, he will most likely try and remove the amulet and perhaps destroy it. If this happens the Wizard will use magic (Fly as the Eagle) to move about and call his minions (previous wearers of the amulet that are under his control) to aid in subduing the host or killing him if he's too powerful for mind control. The Wizard may also use magic to try other forms of control and containment (Domination, Carpet of Adhesion, Magic Net) to capture and take control of his host.

The amulet also extends the life of anyone who wears it. For every year that it is worn, five years are added to the life of the host.

The Golden Serpent — 15th Level Wizard

He has purposely hidden/never revealed his true name, as it would be the one thing that could possibly "free" him from the amulet, thus releasing his spirit and essentially killing him.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Attributes: I.Q. 19, M.E. 30, M.A. 22, P.S. 10, P.P. 12, P.E. 10, P.B. 9, Spd. 7. **Note:** Takes on the physical attributes of his host when he possesses them.

Hit Points: 52. **S.D.C.:** 17. **Note:** Destroying the amulet frees his spirit/kills him. Hit Points, S.D.C. and physical attributes are only given in the event that the Wizard Astrally Projects.

P.P.E.: 408. **I.S.P.:** 102.

Hand to Hand: Basic.

Attacks Per Melee: Seven.

Bonuses: +2 to strike, +3 to parry, +3 to dodge, +4 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +4 to pull punch, Critical: 18-20, +4 damage.

Weapons: None; relies on magic or the martial art prowess of the host (which will include their weapons).

Armor: None. The amulet is small (-3 to strike on an aimed attack) and difficult to hit. Will use the armor of the host to protect both the amulet and the host.

Magic Items: He has several treasure troves of magical items, lost artifacts and magic scrolls. He may try to bargain for his life and offer one of these treasure troves up.

Other Equipment: Anything his hosts or minions may have or own.

Skills of Note: Skill-wise he is very limited, and what skills he does have are mostly intellectual, such as History, Languages (Elven, Dwarven, Southern, Eastern, Northern and Wolfen), and Lore (all). He often uses his host/minions for their skills and likes to have the best fighters at his command (and as his main hosts) to ensure his survival, which is the main reason for the tournaments.

Magic Knowledge: Knows pretty much every common spell. He is trying to learn some other form of magic and discover some Spells of Legend (his current hobby). He also has all the abilities of a 15th level Wizard and can still draw upon the environment and his minions/host for mystic energy (the host gives it freely).

Psionics: Possesses the Sensitive powers of Astral Projection, Telepathy, Empathy, Mind Block, See Aura, Sense Evil, Object Read, and Presence Sense.

Kulkran Bates

10th Level Warrior Monk, the Golden Serpent's Oldest Living Host/Minion.

Kulkran was the eighth victim of the Golden Serpent and has been his main host for almost 500 years. His martial arts training has kept him youthful in his own right, and he still has the body and reflexes of a 40 year old and looks to be only in his 60's. Kulkran will be the one organizing and running the tournament.

Alignment: Unprincipled (use to be Principled but several centuries of being the Golden Serpent's slave has crumbled his morals).

Attributes: I.Q. 12, M.E. 15, M.A. 18, P.S. 22, P.P. 22, P.E. 26, P.B. 14, Spd. 15.

Hit Points: 86. **S.D.C.:** 10.

P.P.E.: 46

Martial Arts Form: Jujutsu.

Attacks Per Melee: Seven.

Bonuses: +5 to strike, +7 to parry, +7 to dodge, +7 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +7 to pull punch, Critical: 18-20, Knock

Out/Stun: 20, Death Blow: 20, +1 to maintain balance, +8 damage, +3 to disarm, +2 to body flip/throw.

Martial Art Powers: Tamashiwara, Martial Art Awareness, Falling, Neural Atemi, Withering Flesh Atemi.

Weapons: None, relies on his martial art prowess.

Armor: None, relies on his martial art prowess.

Magic Items: He usually wears the Golden Serpent amulet, but also possesses a cloak that allows him to turn invisible once the hood is raised up over his head and a magic word is spoken softly.

Other Equipment: Anything his master deems useful.

Skills of Note: Is well versed in medicine and can treat most ailments with herbs. He can also perform surgery and other medical tasks as a very proficient doctor.

Cobdin, The Drunkard

3rd Level Martial Arts Master

Cobdin can be played either as a loud-mouthed and happy drunk who the characters hear about the tournament from, or as a Martial Arts Master disguised as a drunk who tries to enlist the characters to help him get to the tournament. He could also hint that something isn't quite right about the tournament and invite the players to help him find out what it is. In any case, Cobdin will be cheerful, easy going and always has a good tale, story or legend to share with anyone who will listen.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Attributes: I.Q. 14, M.E. 17, M.A. 21, P.S. 22, P.P. 21, P.E. 28, P.B. 10, Spd. 15.

Hit Points: 43. **S.D.C.:** 77.

P.P.E.: 34

Martial Arts Form: Drunken Style Kung Fu.

Attacks Per Melee: Four.

Bonuses: +1 to strike, +2 to parry, +2 to dodge, +3 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +3 to pull punch, +2 to somersault/stagger/roll/back flip, Critical Strike: 19-20 or from behind, Knock Out/Stun: 19-20 or from behind, +1 to rear attacks (backward sweep, backhand strike).

Martial Art Powers: Eternal Clarity, Combination of Kangeiko and Shochu Geiko (winter and summer training), Stone Ox.

Weapons: None, relies on his martial arts prowess.

Armor: None, relies on his martial art prowess and body hardening.

Magic Items: He carries a number of magical potions, which he often drinks in conjunction with alcohol to disguise the drinking of them.

Other Equipment: Bare minimum; some traveling clothes and several gourds of alcoholic beverages.

Skills of Note: Knows several Rogue skills and uses them to collect information from the unaware. His drunken disguise helps a lot.

Alcoholic Consumption/Drunkness: Cobdin is an expert in the consumption of alcohol (see Eternal Clarity body hardening exercise), he knows his limits (getting enough to give him an edge, but not too much to overly destroy his reflexes) and he can out-drink just about anybody. Cobdin can drink

eight drinks before feeling the first effects of alcohol (most humans will feel it after three drinks), which is -6% to all skills. He also feels reduced physical pain and inflicts +2 more damage in attacks due to lack of control. The next level is fifteen drinks (six drinks for other humans), which induces penalties of -12% on all skills, -2 on all combat rolls and speed is -20%. After twenty-three drinks (other humans at nine drinks) he's -24% on all skills, speed is reduced to half, attacks are halved and all combat abilities are halved. After thirty drinks (twelve for normal humans) he's -40% on all skills, speed is reduced by 80%, reduce attacks per melee to two, and reduce initiative and all combat bonuses to zero.

Experience Tables for New O.C.C.s

Samurai/Ronin

1. 0,000 – 2,150
2. 2,151 – 4,300
3. 4,301 – 8,600
4. 8,601 – 17,200
5. 17,201 – 25,500
6. 25,501 – 36,000
7. 36,001 – 52,000
8. 52,001 – 73,000
9. 73,001 – 98,000
10. 98,001 – 134,000
11. 134,001 – 184,000
12. 184,001 – 240,000
13. 240,001 – 295,000
14. 295,001 – 385,000
15. 385,001 – 450,000

Ninja

1. 0,000 – 2,400
2. 2,401 – 4,600
3. 4,601 – 9,200
4. 9,201 – 18,400
5. 18,401 – 28,300
6. 28,301 – 48,000
7. 48,001 – 78,000
8. 78,001 – 110,000
9. 110,001 – 150,000
10. 150,001 – 200,000
11. 200,001 – 250,000
12. 250,001 – 310,000
13. 310,001 – 380,000
14. 380,001 – 470,000
15. 470,001 – 600,000

Martial Arts Master

Warrior Monk

1. 0,000 – 2,300
2. 2,301 – 4,460
3. 4,461 – 9,200
4. 9,201 – 17,000
5. 17,001 – 28,000
6. 28,001 – 36,000
7. 36,001 – 51,000
8. 51,001 – 73,000
9. 73,001 – 98,000
10. 98,001 – 139,000
11. 139,001 – 189,000
12. 189,001 – 239,000
13. 239,001 – 289,000
14. 289,001 – 349,000
15. 349,001 – 409,000

For all the optional O.C.C.s, use the corresponding Experience Tables as found in their original books.

Nightbane®

The Pros and Cons of Studying Magic

Optional New Sorcerous Proficiencies and Limitations for Nightbane®

By Ed Woodward III

In Nightbane, magic is not the solid and reliable thing that it is in Palladium's other games. Spells go wrong, bad things happen, and generally it wreaks havoc with the laws of nature. To further complicate things, not all magic users, not even all magic users of the same level and O.C.C., are created equally. Some have serious flaws in how they cast spells, while others have incredible advantages that others do not have.

Below are tables for new Sorcerous Proficiencies and Limitations. They should generally be used in the same way as the tables presented in *Through the Glass Darkly™*, however I highly recommend that instead of treating these abilities as skills that a Sorcerer (or other magic user) can learn, you should treat them as innate parts of the way that they use magic.

What I do with these tables (and those in *Through the Glass Darkly™*) is I allow every magic using character the option of rolling on the tables below to determine if they have any Proficiencies or Limitations. Then they roll to determine what those are. If they roll something that does not fit with the character or would make play nearly impossible (i.e. a Channeler with Ritual Dependence or Bloodmage for his Limitations would drastically reduce the effectiveness and playability of the character), I allow them to re-roll and gain abilities that fit better. I don't make the characters expend skills for these abilities, and they do not automatically have the same number of Limitations as they have Proficiencies. The purpose of these things is to round out the mage, and make magic seem more mysterious and unpredictable (it is magic, after all).

Note: All Limitations and Proficiencies gained are permanent unless the roll says otherwise (or your G.M. is generous), and cannot be changed or gotten rid of at a later date.

Roll to Determine the Number of Proficiencies

01-30% No Proficiencies: The character has no Sorcerous Proficiencies.

31-50% One Proficiency: The character only has one Proficiency; roll below to determine the exact nature of the Proficiency.

51-65% Two Proficiencies: The character has two Sorcerous Proficiencies; roll below to determine the exact natures of the Proficiencies.

66-80% Three Proficiencies: The character has three Proficiencies; roll below to determine the exact natures of the Proficiencies.

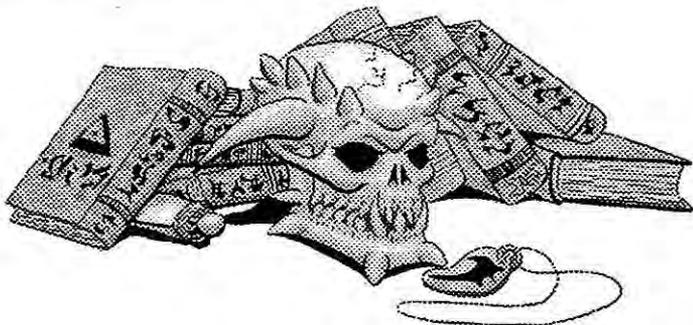
81-95% Four Proficiencies: The character has four Sorcerous Proficiencies; roll below to determine the exact natures of the Proficiencies.

96-00% Increasing Proficiencies: The character begins with two Proficiencies and gains an additional Proficiency at levels four, eight, and twelve. Roll below to determine the exact natures of the Proficiencies.

Sorcerous Proficiencies

01-04% Highly Efficient: Due to the way the character stores and uses his mystical energies, the P.P.E. cost of the character's spells is reduced by 10% (i.e. a spell normally costing 100 P.P.E. will only cost him 90 P.P.E.). Spells can never cost less than one P.P.E., and fractions are rounded up. If this Proficiency is taken twice, the P.P.E. cost is reduced by 20%.

05-08% Great Mystic Strength: The character gains a bonus of +2 to his Spell Strength, making it much more difficult to save vs his spells. If this Proficiency is taken twice, the character's Spell Strength is increased by +4 instead of +2.



09-12% Focus Object: The character is able to use an object as a focus for his spells, increasing his casting abilities by 2 levels (i.e. a first level caster would cast spells as if he were a third level caster while using his focus object). The focus object must be a specific object that the character has spent a long time practicing with and which has special significance to him, and it must be held in his hand while casting for him to use this ability. The object could be nearly anything, however medallions, crystals, wands and staves are the most common. If the focus object is ever lost, the character cannot use this ability until it is recovered. (Generous G.M.s may allow the character to learn to use a new focus object, but it will take time and practice, and the object will have to have a special significance to the character.) If this ability is taken twice, the character casts as if he were 4 levels higher than he is while using the focus object.

13-16% Cast by Thought Alone: The sorcerer was taught to shape magic with his will alone, and does not need to speak or make gestures to cast incantations. This only applies for incantations, not for rituals. This Proficiency may not be taken twice.

17-20% Fast Caster: The character was taught to cast spells very quickly, granting him a bonus of +3 to initiative in any melee in which his first action is casting a spell. If this ability is taken twice, the initiative bonus is increased to +6.

21-24% Elementalist: The spell caster has a special affinity with a particular element (i.e. wind, water, earth, or fire). This affinity is not enough to make the character a Warlock, but it does grant bonuses when casting spells related to that element. When casting spells of his element, the character gains a +1 to Spell Strength, however he suffers a -1 penalty to his saving throws vs spells of the opposing element (water opposes fire, earth opposes air). If this Proficiency is taken twice, the character gains four additional spells from levels 1-5 that relate to the element he has an affinity for (i.e. a mage with an affinity for fire would start out with 4 additional fire spells). If you are unsure if a spell relates to a particular element, check the spell list for the Warlock O.C.C. (*Palladium Fantasy RPG*®, pages 218-244), and see if there is something similar under the spells for that element.

25-28% Fast Learner: Having a talent for memorization and study, the character learns spells quicker than others. As a result the character automatically gains one additional spell per level of experience. The new spell can be from any level up to the character's current level (e.g. a 4th level caster can only select from levels 1-4 for the extra spell), and is subject to any limitations that the character's O.C.C. places on their spell selections. If this ability is selected twice, the character will gain 3 additional spells every odd level, instead of gaining one every level (i.e. the character will learn 3 additional spells at levels 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, etc.).

29-32% Confident: The character is confident and self-assured. His experiences and training have given him a good understanding of his abilities and a positive outlook. The character gains +2 to M.A. and a +2 to save vs Horror Factor.

33-36% Granted Memories: At some point during his training, something awakened memories in the mage (or granted them to him). These could be memories of a past life, or gifts from a mentor or ancestral spirit who is trying to teach the character through them, or something else entirely. Whatever the case, the character gains three additional skills with a +10% bonus (any I.Q. bonus will apply also). These skills increase normally as the character goes up in levels. They may or may not be skills that the character is normally able to learn, and all selections should be discussed with the G.M. and be appropriate for their source (i.e. memories of a past life in ancient Egypt will not grant Computer skills). If this Proficiency is selected twice, the character gains six additional skills instead of three.

37-40% Servant: The spell caster has a servant (slave? apprentice?) who works for him, cleaning his house, assisting in rituals and experiments, and other basic tasks. The servant is completely loyal and would never betray the sorcerer unless he is badly mistreated, however he is only a servant and cannot fight for the character. The servant will be a first level character, and will have only a few skills, however he is usually a good cook and has a basic idea of magical principles, enabling him to assist the sorcerer in his tasks, but has no spell casting abilities of his own (basically this character is like Igor, assisting Dr. Frankenstein). If this Proficiency is selected twice, then the servant may be more experienced (level 2 or 3), he could have some minor spell casting abilities (1D6 spells from levels 1-4), the servant could actually be a minor supernatural creature (usually a Doppelganger, or similar almost human creature selected by the G.M.), or there could be 2 servants. The player may select which option he wishes to use.



41-44% Aura of Power: The magical energies coursing through the character's body have strengthened his aura. To anyone reading his aura, the character will seem to be 4 levels higher with 50% more P.P.E. and I.S.P. than he actually has. In addition, this character gains an Awe Factor of 14 to everyone around him, and +15% to his attempts to intimidate people. If this ability is taken twice, the character seems to be twice his actual level, with twice as much P.P.E. and I.S.P. than he actual has, and he gains an Awe Factor of 16, and +30% to intimidate.

45-48% Supernatural Strength: The magical energies contained within the sorcerer have increased the physical power of his body, granting him Supernatural Strength. The character gains a +4 bonus to his P.S., which is now Supernatural. If taken twice, this ability grants a +10 bonus to Strength instead of only a +4 bonus.

49-52% Supernatural Endurance: The constant gathering and expending of mystical energies involved in the study of magic have greatly increased this mage's stamina. The character gains a bonus of +2 to his P.E., and it becomes Supernatural. If this ability is taken twice, the P.E. bonus is increased to +6. Remember that this increase in P.E. will also affect the character's saving throws.

53-56% Connection with Nature: Perhaps as part of his magical training the character spent many hours out in secluded areas communing with nature, or maybe the character just has an affinity for the natural world. Whatever the case, he has developed a strong connection with nature. As a result of this bond with nature, animals will never attack the character unless he attacks them first or they are being controlled by magic. The character also gains a +1 to his Spell Strength when casting spells on natural animals (no bonus against Nightlands creatures or supernatural predators), and if he gains a Familiar that is a natural animal, it will automatically have the Familiar Power of Loyalty at no cost. If this ability is selected twice, the character gains a +2 to his Spell Strength when casting spells on natural animals, and he can have two Familiars at once! (Both Familiars must be the same species and must be natural animals; generally the Familiars will be a mated pair.)

57-60% Connection with a Ritual Site: The sorcerer has a powerful connection to a particular ritual site. While he is within 10 miles (16 km) of that site he casts spells as though he were 2 levels higher, and whenever he is *at the site* he can draw on an additional 5 P.P.E. per level of experience every hour. The ritual site could be anywhere in the world, and could be anything from Stonehenge to a site the character has built himself. If the ritual site is destroyed (the building leveled, the stone circle knocked down, etc.), the character loses all abilities gained from this power (generous G.M.s may allow the character to form a bond with another site if this happens, but this should involve a major undertaking). If this ability is taken twice, the character casts as if 4 levels higher when within 20 miles (32 km) of the site, and whenever he is at the site he can draw on an additional 10 P.P.E. per level of experience every hour.

61-64% War Mage: Whether this character's magical training was focused on using magic in combat, or the character simply has a talent in that area, he is a deadly combatant. As a result of the war mage's aptitude, all of his combat spells inflict double the normal damage. However, healing spells cast by this character are only half as effective as normal. If this Proficiency is taken twice, the character gains a +3 to strike with any harmful spell in combat (this is in addition to any strike bonuses the spell may have).

65-68% Healer: Gifted with a gentle spirit, this character's magic is focused toward helping others. As a result, any healing spells he casts have double the normal effectiveness, however this focus makes him hesitant to injure others and the character's harmful spells inflict only half the normal damage. If this is taken twice, the character's healing spells have triple the normal effect.

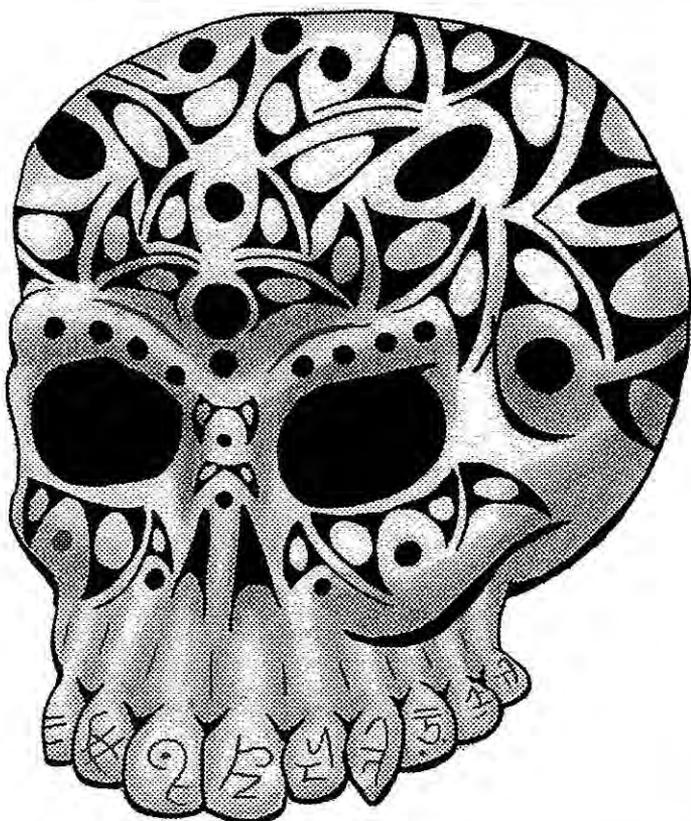
69-72% Obscurantist: Secretive by his nature, this mage specializes in magic that allows him to hide his nature. All spells of concealment and disguise cast by this character have double the normal duration, and he has a +2 bonus to any saving throws against spells or powers that will reveal information about him. If the spell or power does not normally grant a saving throw, the character is allowed a standard saving throw vs spell, without any bonuses, to resist it revealing information about him. If this Proficiency is selected twice, the character's spells of disguise and concealment have four times the normal duration, and he gains a +4 to his saving throws vs information revealing spells or powers (+2 vs those that don't normally grant a saving throw).

73-76% Summoner: This magic user has a definite talent for casting spells that summon creatures and control them. All summoning spells cast by this character have double the normal duration. If this ability is taken twice, the character summons twice the normal number of creatures with his summoning spells as well.

77-80% Psychomancer: Whether it is through training or natural ability, this Mage has a defined talent for manipulating the minds of others. This character gains a bonus of +1 to Spell Strength for spells that affect or control the mind, and +2 to all saving throws vs any kind of mind control. If this ability is taken twice, the character's mind controlling spells have double the normal duration as well.

81-83% Illusionist: Trickery and sleight of hand are this character's greatest abilities, and he has put great effort into per-

fecting them. As a result, the character's illusion spells are cast as if he were 2 levels higher, and have a bonus of +1 to Spell Strength. If this Proficiency is selected twice, the character's illusions have double the normal duration.



84-86% Necromantic Specialist: Death fascinates this character, and as a result he has spent a great deal of energy studying it. Any spells relating to the undead and animated dead will have double their normal duration. In addition, the character automatically gains the spells Reanimate Flesh (*Through the Glass Darkly*[™], page 56) and Animate and Control Dead (*Palladium Fantasy RPG*[®], page 200). If this ability is taken twice, the duration of the character's Necromantic spells is four times normal, and he automatically gains the spell Create Zombies (*Through the Glass Darkly*[™], page 58).

87-89% Mystic Battery: The magic user is somehow able to store more mystical energy than others with similar training. The character gains a bonus of +1D4x10 P.P.E. If this ability is taken twice, the bonus is the same, but the character gains an additional +1D6 P.P.E. per level of experience.

90-93% Mystical Protection: The magical energies coursing through the mage's body have made him remarkably tough. The character gains a bonus of +4D6 to his S.D.C. +2D6 to his Hit Points, and gains a Natural A.R. of 10. If this ability is taken twice, the bonuses are increased to +1D4x10 to S.D.C., +4D6 to Hit Points, and the character's Natural A.R. becomes 16.

94-97% Roll on the Other Table: Roll on the table presented in *Through the Glass Darkly*[™], pages 24-26.

98-00% Doubled Proficiency: Roll again on this table, however the resulting roll counts as if the Proficiency were rolled twice.

Roll to Determine the Number of Sorcerous Limitations

01-10% No Limitations: The character has no Sorcerous Limitations.

11-35% One Limitation: The character only has one Limitation. Roll below to determine the exact nature of the Limitation. All Limitations are permanent.

36-50% Two Limitations: The character has two Sorcerous Limitations. Roll below to determine the exact natures of the Limitations. All Limitations are permanent.

51-65% Three Limitations: The character has three Limitations. Roll below to determine the exact natures of the Limitations. All Limitations are permanent.

66-80% Four Limitations: The character has four Sorcerous Limitations. Roll below to determine the exact natures of the Limitations. All Limitations are permanent.

81-95% Increasing Limitations: The character begins with 2 Limitations and gains an additional Limitation at levels four, eight, and twelve. Roll below to determine the exact natures of the Limitations. All Limitations are permanent.

96-00% Decreasing Limitations: The character begins with four Limitations but may get rid of one Limitation at levels four, eight, and twelve. Roll below to determine the exact natures of the Limitations.

Sorcerous Limitations

01-04% Grossly Inefficient: Due to the way the character stores and uses his mystical energies, the P.P.E. cost of the character's spells is increased by 10% (i.e. a spell normally costing 100 P.P.E. will cost him 110 P.P.E.). Fractions are rounded up. If this Limitation is taken twice, the P.P.E. cost is increased by 20%.

05-08% Weak Spell Ability: For whatever reason, the character has weak spell casting abilities. As a result, all of his spells may be saved against with a +2 bonus, making it much easier to resist his spells. If this Limitation is taken twice, then saving throws vs this character's spells are increased by +4 instead of +2.

09-13% Repelled by Holy Symbols: Like a vampire, this character can be held at bay by holy symbols. Any time the character encounters a holy symbol that he recognizes as such, he must save vs Horror Factor 18 or be unable to approach within 10 feet (3 m) of it. If the holy symbol is held out forcefully (in much the same way crosses are used against vampires), the character will recoil in fear and be unable to approach within 10 feet (3 m) of the person holding it. If the character actually touches the holy symbol, he will be burned for 2D6 S.D.C. However, the character is only affected by symbols that he recognizes as religious icons. If the character doesn't know it is a holy symbol, it won't harm him. If this Limitation is selected twice, the character takes double damage from touching holy symbols, and he cannot approach within 20 feet (6.1 m) on a failed save or when a symbol is presented forcefully.

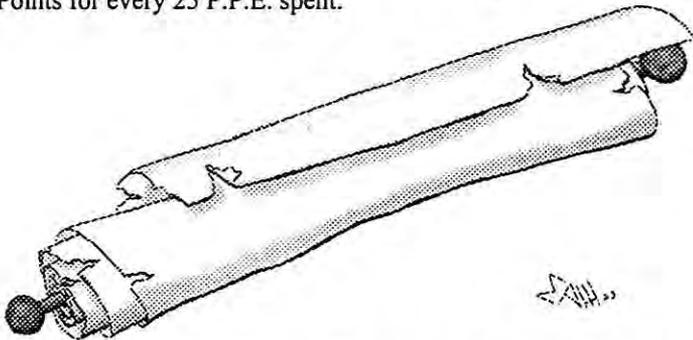
14-17% Light Show: For some reason, whenever this character casts a spell, it is accompanied by spectacular visual effects centered on the caster. The effects vary, some mages have

glowing letters, or mystical looking circles appear in front of them as they cast, some are surrounded in a glowing aura or have raw magical energies crawling along their skin, etc. Whatever the effect, it is always sure to get people's attention, totally preventing the character from secretly casting spells. Whatever effect is chosen, it is virtually identical for every spell (so if the character has glowing runes appear in front of him when he casts, they could be a different rune for each spell, but it will always be a rune, or series of runes). Most spell casters who have this Limitation actually enjoy its effects despite its disadvantages. This Limitation cannot be selected twice.

18-22% Easily Distracted: Whether it is because the character has a lot on his mind, or he has a tendency to daydream, he has difficulty concentrating on controlling his spells. Whenever the character casts a spell that requires his concentration to control, and any time he is performing a lengthy ritual, he must make a saving throw vs insanity (12 or better) once per half hour or the spell is ruined and the P.P.E. is expended with little or no effect. If there is combat or a similarly distracting situation going on around the character, he must make his saving throw at the beginning of every melee round, or lose his concentration and ruin the spell. If this Limitation is taken twice, the character suffers a -3 penalty to his saving throws against being distracted.

23-26% Unstoppable Spells: Either the character's magical training was flawed in some way, or perhaps there is something wrong with the way the character releases his spells. Whatever the case, he cannot cancel his spells once they are cast. Whatever spell this character casts, it must run its full duration or be dispelled by other spells or abilities, because the character is completely incapable of stopping it. This Limitation cannot be taken twice.

27-31% Life Draining Magic: Whether it is something that was deliberately taught to him, or something he instinctively does, this mage taps into his life force in order to cast his spells. Tapping into his life force has the advantage that all of this caster's spells cost only 75% of the P.P.E. that they normally should. However, this advantage comes at a price — for every 25 P.P.E. the character expends (whether from his personal reserve or drawn from other sources), he will take 1 point of damage directly to his Hit Points. This makes casting spells dangerous, and casting powerful spells potentially lethal to the mage. Damage taken this way heals normally and can be healed by magic like any other damage. If this Limitation is selected twice, the character takes 2 points of damage directly to Hit Points for every 25 P.P.E. spent.



32-35% Cast by Writing: This sorcerer was taught to shape magic by writing fragments of spells out on paper (or whatever medium). As a result, any time he wishes to cast a spell he needs to have a pen and paper or other writing implements handy (a

stick scratching in dirt will work). The writing is in something of a magical shorthand, and never really makes sense to anyone else. It takes twice as long as normal to cast spells in this way (not including the time it takes to find a pen and something to write on), greatly reducing the speed at which the character is able to cast spells. Spells cannot be pre-written, and if the character is interrupted before he finishes the spell, it is not cast (no P.P.E. is expended). Once the character is finished writing out the spell, the writing vanishes (along with the paper, if it is written on paper), and the spell takes effect. When casting spells that have a range of touch, the character must touch the target of the spell with the writing (either touching them with what he wrote the spell on, or actually writing the spell on his target). If this Limitation is selected twice, the character requires three times as long as normal to cast his spells, instead of twice.

36-39% Disliked by Animals: There is something not quite right about this character that causes natural animals to shun him. Dogs will bark at him, cats will hiss and run away, and larger, more aggressive animals are likely to attack him with little provocation. Any spells cast on normal animals to summon or control them will have half their normal duration, and if large and aggressive animals are summoned he must save vs spell when the duration elapses or they will try to attack him. If this character gains a familiar that is a natural animal, he must pay double the normal cost if he wishes to purchase the familiar power of Loyalty.

40-43% Forgetful: Whether it actually has anything to do with his magical training or not is debatable, but this mage has a terrible habit of forgetting his spells, and must glance at his notes before casting a spell (counts as one attack). If he does not consult his notes, he only has a 30% +2% per level of experience chance of casting the correct spell. If this roll fails, he will cast a different spell that he knows of the same level by mistake (determined by the G.M.). If this Limitation is selected twice, it takes 2 attacks for him to search his notes, and the character only has a 15% +2% per level of experience chance of casting the proper spell without them. In this case, if the wrong spell is cast, it does not even need to be one the caster actually knows!

44-48% Arrogance: Perhaps the greatest weakness a magic user can have is arrogance. This character always assumes that his spells are more powerful than those of other magic users (he will usually have a reason of some kind for this belief), and especially when compared to other types of magic users. This character will only work well with a team when he is the leader, and even then he completely rejects other people's ideas and is constantly going off to do his own thing. This character suffers a -2 penalty to his M.E. and a -4 penalty to all Perception rolls because of his arrogant, snobbish attitude, and his assumption that he already knows everything he needs to. If this Limitation is selected twice, the character suffers a -4 penalty to M.E. and a -8 penalty to Perception.

49-52% Magical Surge & Ebb: The magical energies residing in this mage are unstable, and can increase or decrease in strength without warning. As a result of this instability, whenever the character casts a spell he must roll to determine its strength. When casting, roll 1D6 and consult the following sub-table (results are also given for if the Limitation is taken twice).

1. The P.P.E. is expended but nothing happens.

2. The spell is cast as if the caster were 2 levels lower. If taken twice, all effects of the spell function at a quarter its normal strength (1/4 range, duration, damage, etc.).
3. The spell is cast as if the caster were 1 level lower. If taken twice, the spell functions at half strength.
4. The spell functions normally.
5. The spell functions as if the caster were 1 level higher. If taken twice, the spell functions at double its normal strength.
6. The spell functions as if the caster were 2 levels higher. If taken twice, the spell functions at triple its normal strength.

53-56% Unpredictable Secondary Effects: Somehow this character is unconsciously tapping into the power of the Mirrorwall, similarly to the way a Mirrormage does, however in this case it does not result in a reduced cost for spell casting, and it has no risk of damaging the Mirrorwall. Instead, the character will cast two spells simultaneously instead of only one. The second spell does not cost the character any P.P.E. to cast, however he also has no control over what the second spell is, and it may have an effect that is completely opposite what he intended. The second spell is always of equal level to the spell that the mage intended to cast, but is not necessarily a spell that is known to the caster. The second spell is chosen by the G.M. If this Limitation is selected twice, the second spell may be one level higher or lower than the intended spell (Game Masters, don't be too evil with this).

57-60% Nightmares: This character is plagued with nightmares due to something that happened during the course of this character's magical training. This could be a single recurring nightmare, or it could be a different nightmare each time. The character will be woken up by nightmares 1D4 times every week, and if the character witnesses a tragedy of some sort (friend killed, disaster that causes a great loss of life, etc.), there is a 60% chance that he will have a nightmare that night. On the nights that he has a nightmare, he will recover no P.P.E., and the character suffers a -2 penalty to Perception and initiative for the entire day after a nightmare due to exhaustion from lack of sleep. If this Limitation is taken twice, the character suffers from nightmares 1D6 nights a week, and will always have a nightmare after witnessing a tragedy. Also, the penalties to initiative and Perception are increased to -4 on the day after a nightmare.

61-64% Focus Dependent: Similar to the Sorcerous Proficiency of Focus Object, the character was taught to focus his spells through a charm of some kind when casting. However, in this case the character needs to have the object in order to cast the spells at his full strength. Any time the character attempts to cast a spell without his focus object, the spell functions as if the caster were 2 levels lower than he actually is. The focus object must be a specific object that the character has spent a long time practicing with and has special significance to him, and it must be held in his hand while casting for him to use his full strength. The object could be nearly anything, but medallions, crystals, wands, and staves are the most common. If the focus object is ever lost, the character cannot cast spells at his full strength until it is recovered. (Generous G.M.s may allow the character to learn to use a new focus object, but it will take time and practice, and the object will have to have a special significance to the character.) If this ability is taken twice, the character's spells function at half their normal strength (half the normal range,



damage, duration, etc.) whenever he casts spells without his focus object.

65-68% Aura of Evil: The magical energies coursing through his body have permanently altered the character's aura, making him appear to be a supernatural creature. The character now radiates an aura of supernatural evil, granting him a Horror Factor of 14, and when he is scanned with See Aura, Sense Evil and similar powers, he registers as being supernaturally evil (regardless of his true alignment). If this Limitation is taken twice, the character's Horror Factor increases to 18, and even non-psychics can sense (automatically) that he is a being of supernatural evil (even if he isn't).

69-72% Mystic Rush: Somehow during the course of study, this mage began to channel his magical energies through the pleasure centers in his brain. As a result, using magic fills him with an intense feeling of physical pleasure. This does not affect the functioning of his spells in any way, however he is likely to become addicted to spell casting. Every time the caster expends more than 75% of his P.P.E., he must make a saving throw of 12 or higher (M.E. bonuses vs insanity apply), or he will become addicted to casting spells. If this Limitation is selected twice, the character's saving throw to resist the addiction must be 16 or higher.

If the character becomes an addict, he will constantly cast spells to do everything, and will engage in magical research to come up with new spells to do the simplest tasks (they commonly invent spells to change the channel on the TV, fetch their

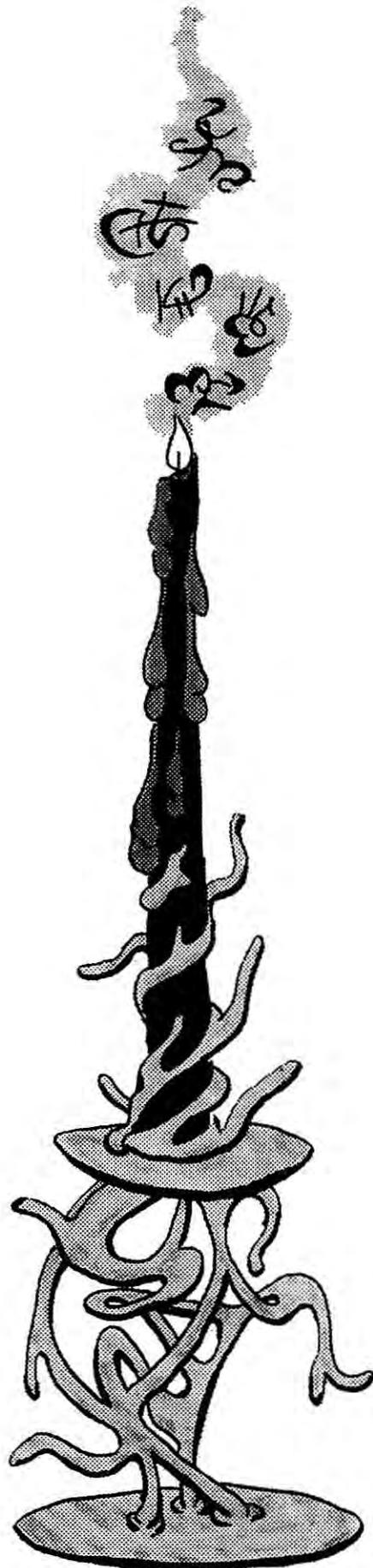
slippers, or equally silly and mundane tasks), because he is firmly convinced that casting spells is the best way to do EVERYTHING. As a result of all this spell casting, the character will almost always have only half his P.P.E. (he already spent the other half), but the constant practice does have one benefit: the addicted character gains a bonus of +2D6 P.P.E. per level. Should the character ever wish to escape this addiction, he must give up casting magic forever. If he is willing to do that, then follow the standard rules for overcoming an addiction (*Nightbane® RPG*, page 48). Remember that casting spells is this character's drug, so any time he casts he is likely to relapse into his addiction.

73-76% Ritual Cleansing: After expending P.P.E., the character must perform some kind of ritual of cleansing in order to allow his body to recover the spent energy. The ritual itself could be almost anything depending on the type of mage and his culture. Some possibilities include sitting under a waterfall, bathing in a stream, meditating while burning incense, chanting, and praying to a deity. Whatever the ritual, it should take about an hour to perform, and after that the character will again be able to recover P.P.E. normally. However, the next time the character casts a spell he will stop recovering his P.P.E., and must undergo the cleansing all over again. If this Limitation is selected twice, the character's P.P.E. can only be recovered during the ritual cleansing, so the character will have to continue the cleansing ritual until his P.P.E. is fully recovered (this means that if his ritual is chanting, he will have to chant until he has regained his full P.P.E.).

77-80% Scars: Whether there was a magical accident or it was somehow part of his training, the character's body is horribly scarred, reducing his P.B. by 2D4. However, the suffering that caused these scars grants the character a +2 bonus to saving throws vs pain and pain related spells and powers. Because of the scars, the character is easy to recognize, and has great difficulty blending in with crowds. These scars are permanent and cannot be healed by any known means. If this Limitation is selected twice, the character's body is completely covered in scars, and the character's P.B. is reduced to 3, but his bonuses to resist pain are increased to +5.

81-90% Roll on Other Table: Roll on the table presented in *Through the Glass Darkly™*, pages 27-28.

91-00% Doubled Limitation: Roll again on this table, however the resulting roll counts as if the Limitation were rolled twice.



The Software Valley War



Optional Setting and Adventures for Heroes Unlimited, 2nd Edition™

By Todd Yoho

The Software Valley War is setting and background material for a series of **Heroes Unlimited™** adventures. The main conflict is between rival software companies near the fictional metropolis of Westside City, in an area of California known as "Software Valley" because of its numerous programming companies. It can tie in and work well with **Ninjas and Superspies™** or even **Nightbane®**. The companies presented could be secretly controlled by The White Moth (see **Ninjas and Superspies™**, page 169), or even allied with the Nightlords. Game Masters, tailor this to suit your campaigns and players. The central villains in this campaign are the software company Personaware and a trio of industrial espionage specialists, Corporate Solutions. Corporate Solutions is a team of villains suited to challenge a small or mid-sized group of medium level heroes. A precursor "villain" comes in the form of a scientific research company called Southern Medical Solutions.

Personaware

Personaware was founded by William Latch, a graduate of Cal-Tech. A man with a brilliant mind for mathematics, Latch went to work for a major computer manufacturer after college. He was well on his way to upper management when he suffered a head injury while touring a company warehouse, and settled out of court for an undisclosed sum of money. With newfound wealth and freedom in hand, he used the settlement to open his own software company, Intertell, with three of his college friends. Based in what was soon to be known as Software Valley, near Westside City in northern California, Intertell specialized in small business software, and was known for a reliable product delivered on time and often ahead of schedule. However, once the company was off and running, Latch was bought out and fired by the other three owners. Salvaging what he could and borrowing heavily, he founded Personaware and adopted a policy of "get them before they get you." Also based in northern California, Personaware was founded as a direct competitor to Intertell in business software, but also produced revolutionary home computing software. With Personaware financially stable, he has turned his eye on crushing his competition, by any means necessary.

Personaware Software Corporation

Built using the Organizations format found in *Villains Unlimited™* (pages 34-41) with some G.M. tweaking. A Level Three Organization:

- A. Outfits: #1 None.
 - B. Equipment: #4 Electronic Supplies. Mostly computers and surveillance equipment purchased from outside sources.
 - C. Weapons: #1 None. Freelancers are responsible for their own equipment.
 - D. Bionics and Robotics: #2 Basic Systems. Highly advanced programming abilities but extremely limited in actual hardware applications.
 - E. Vehicles: #3 Fleet Vehicles. The company has 2 private jets and a fleet of company cars.
 - F. Communications: #4 Computerized.
 - G. Offices and Hideouts: #3 National.
 - H. Military Power: #2 Security Guards.
 - I. Super Powered Operatives: #2 Freelance. Typically hires Corporate Solutions.
 - J. Sponsorship: #3 Private Industry.
 - K. Special Budget: #3 Small Potatoes. They typically do not front a lot of cash unless absolutely necessary.
 - L. Administrative Control: #2 Loose Laws. Exerted through bribes to law enforcement and software "mishap" extortion.
 - M. Internal Security: #4 Iron Clad.
 - N. External Infiltration: #4 General Infiltration. This varies according to the mandate of the company. If an active hostile policy against a rival company is in force, #6 Major Infiltration is striven for.
 - O. Research and Information Gathering: #1 None.
 - P. Credentials: #4 Known.
 - Q. Salary: #5 Excellent. Personaware pays its employees at least 15% better than the closest competition.
- Personaware Software total points spent: 176.

Latch hired as many spies and saboteurs as he did programmers, and scored his first major victory by planting one of his own employees in the ranks of Intertell's Human Resources department. After this, he had an open door to introduce his own industrial spies into his former company. Through spying and sabotage, he has been able to stay one step ahead of Intertell, stealing clients and obtaining patents while engaging in original research. Latch is also planning on exacting his revenge on his former friends and partners. After which, he plans on taking the rest of the client base away from Intertell, absorbing the company in a stock purchase deal, and will then set his sights on the larger competition. No fool, he knows that he will need the best to engage in subterfuge against the powers of Software Valley. Enter an up and coming team of industrial specialists: Corporate Solutions.

Corporate Solutions

Corporate Solutions is a three-member team of villains who specialize in industrial espionage, burglary, sabotage, extortion and assassination. The three members of Corporate Solutions all have ties to Sarcodyne, a special research arm of a now defunct pharmaceutical and biological research company called Southern Medical Solutions. In 1987, SMS posted record profits with an influenza vaccine and funneled the money into a new, radical research branch, Sarcodyne. The sole purpose of Sarcodyne was experimentation with the reanimation of dead tissue by using an irradiated chemical cocktail dubbed the Lazarus Serum. In early 1989, the results were promising, with four subjects being successfully revived from death. The subjects, a man, a woman and two 8-year-old children, were given the names Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel. How and where these test bodies were recovered from remains a mystery to this day. These four subjects were, however, much more than revived humans. They were resurrected with superhuman abilities, and with only flash impressions of their lives.

After being resurrected, they were tested in thoroughly brutal and inhumane ways. The "First Family," as they were called, were put through rigorous testing of their abilities and trained in a paramilitary fashion. SMS thought they might have something to sell to the military, so they treated the initial test subjects as biological weapons, not people. The Board of Directors at SMS was ecstatic about the progress that Sarcodyne had made, and funneled more money into the project, diverting funds from other parts of the company when necessary. Cutbacks were made in researching medications that would fight HIV, cancer and other pressing medical issues. The rationale was that conquering death itself would yield a wider profit margin than curing illnesses. Initial interest from the Defense Department was supportive, but then, word of the project leaked to the press in January of 1991.

The company was hit with protests from the scientific community, religious leaders and Congress after the intent of their research became public knowledge. In February of 1991, the President of the United States signed an Executive Order placing a 12-year moratorium on Reanimation Research. SMS was devastated. They lost all of their government contracts, and the FDA placed extremely hefty fines and restrictions on them. In addition, the Board of Directors of SMS and Sarcodyne, plus many of the employees, were wanted on a wide variety of charges, including Human Rights Violations. By the end of 1991, the company was forced to file for bankruptcy.

Late in the testing and training process, the adult subjects died of unknown complications, and Abel was killed in a training accident. Rumor spread that the deaths were due to mistakes related to the guilty consciences of some of the employees. This left only one of the children, Cain, to survive. After the government crackdown, what was left of the company was drowning in financial ruin. A small group of fugitive scientists attempted to secretly sell Cain to the highest bidder in July of 1992. Before this could be accomplished, he escaped with the help of two other fugitive Sarcodyne employees, Ariel Lee and Peter Nichols.

Ariel Lee was a promising 19-year-old college student interning with SMS in the summer of 1988. She was starting her soph-

omore year as a Biology major at Georgia Tech when she was offered a position with the Sarcodyne branch of the company. Enticed by the chance to work on the cutting edge, and by the massive salary promised, she quit school and went on-board full time as a research associate. She was fascinated with the research and was instrumental in developing the Lazarus Serum. Unfortunately for her, she was accidentally stuck with a contaminated needle containing a sample of Cain's blood and the Serum. She was immediately quarantined and tests were run. She showed no outward signs of infection or aberrations, so she was allowed to return to work. Six months after the incident, she began to experience unusual visual images. She was able to see through people's clothes, and could "hear" shapes behind her. The truly frightening day came when she discovered her ability to alter her shape. It was all very unsettling and she wrestled with bringing it to the attention of the project manager. However, after seeing how the First Family was treated, she decided to keep her abilities a secret. Ariel went on, honing her abilities and working for Sarcodyne, until the company was shattered by the government crackdown. Her name turned up on the list of the suspected Human Rights Violators. Fearing for her life and freedom, she abandoned her very identity and vanished into anonymity. The ability to alter her appearance enabled her to elude capture, however she had no way to support herself. She couldn't go to friends or family for fear of being caught. Living like a refugee, she became very bitter and angry and turned to the only life left for her; a life of crime that forced her to survive by stealing other people's identities. A chance theft of a fugitive scientist's laptop allowed her to learn of their plans for selling Cain. She felt a certain kinship with him, another life ruined by Sarcodyne, and she set out to rescue him.

Peter Nichols was a member of security for SMS. A former Marine, he served SMS with distinction and was promoted to Chief of Security of the Sarcodyne Complex when the branch was founded. Before being transferred to Sarcodyne, Nichols was a member of the SMS Crisis Response Force, an internal militia, and was outfitted with experimental cybernetic implants. He underwent grueling hours of surgery with no anesthesia so they could be sure the implants were properly connected to his nervous system. After going through the operations, he felt that no human being should be forced to suffer that much pain, and he gained a new respect for human life. He was heavily involved in training the First Family and developed a special liking for them, perhaps because of the pain he suffered while gaining his cybernetic implants. He especially liked the children, Cain and Abel, and treated them like human beings. He expressed concern to the heads of Sarcodyne that the military would not want mindless killing machines. The military would want them to be able to think and feel, to be abstract in thought and not flesh and blood robots, but the Board would not listen. The brutality and degradation of the training and experimentation continued, forcing Nichols to finally resign in January of 1991, citing that he could no longer work for a company that treated human beings that way. One week after his resignation, the story went public and Nichols went underground as he too appeared on a wanted list of Human Rights Violators. Nichols had gone to ground with former Marine buddies in Jacksonville, NC when he learned, through military contacts, of the fugitive scientists' plans to sell Cain. Enraged that the remnants of the

company would still treat Cain this way, he decided to rescue him. Armed with weapons and armor that he “liberated” from SMS when he resigned, Nichols set off for Atlanta.

Cain was being held in a little known subsidiary of SMS called Integrated Systems; so little known, in fact, that it never appeared on any official documentation. It was from this small research facility that Cain was to be sold to the highest bidder. Lee and Nichols stumbled over one another during their respective rescue operations the night before the auction. After a tense moment, where they learned they had a common goal, Lee and Nichols decided to work together to rescue Cain. They broke into the facility, with Lee scouting the way and Nichols eliminating any deterrents and alarms, and spirited Cain away before anyone was the wiser. Cain recognized his benefactors, especially Nichols, who was always nice to him. He expressed his thanks, by his reasoning, by not killing them. While hiding out in the mountain town of Boone, NC, they realized that they made a pretty good team and decided to stick together and forge whatever life they could. Cain didn’t care one way or another, as long as he got to kill, and start his “art collection.”

Eventually, SMS was broken up and bought piecemeal by various rival companies. The government confiscated all of the Sarcodyne research, and those arrested were tried and given various sentences ranging from probation for some, to life imprisonment for others. Some simply disappeared, never to be heard from again. Lee, Nichols and Cain moved to California and began to hire themselves out to whomever they could, ranging from the Mafia to small corporations. It wasn’t until they took several jobs with Personaware and started the “Software Valley War,” as it was called, that they gained respect and truly came into their own. They are currently based in Portland, Oregon. Ariel lives in a one-bedroom apartment, Cain lives in an abandoned boxcar near the landfill, and Nichols lives in a picturesque, suburban 2-story house. Their “secret headquarters” is located on the 5th floor of the Chukwu Financial Services building, downtown. It operates under the front of an environmental think-tank. Ariel serves as the group’s “front man,” meeting with prospective clients and gathering necessary information. Her life sciences background helps maintain the environmentalist façade, and under the name of Erin Holding, she has published several noted articles against genetic tampering in the publication *Environmentalist Today*. Nichols is the strategist behind the operation, planning out their raids and encounters. Under the name Waters, he runs a small but successful hunting and outfitting service. He charges top dollar for his services, and no client ever goes away unhappy. For those who know how to ask, hunting and adventuring “accidents” can also be arranged. This leaves Cain to be the muscle. He is usually just given a target and turned loose. Otherwise, he occupies himself with random stalking and killing of the homeless, drifters, shut-ins and others forgotten by society. Individually, they are competent foes, together they are lethal.

Doppler

Real Name: Ariel Lee.

Common Aliases: Briony Kinnear, Erin Holding, Adriana Paulinski, Doppler.

Alignment: Miscreant.

H.P.: 24. **S.D.C.:** 30.



Height: 5 feet, 6 inches (1.67 m). **Weight:** 119 lbs (53.55 kg).

Age: 32

Attributes: I.Q. 15, M.E. 12, M.A. 22, P.S. 10, P.P. 14, P.E. 12, P.B. 13, Spd. 12.

Disposition: Ariel is intelligent and educated, however she is very bitter because she feels as though she has lost her humanity. Her accidental exposure to the Lazarus Serum stole it from her, Ariel’s work with Sarcodyne cost her the life she knew, and her future is not turning out like she had planned. She is full of anger and rage, and delights in taking it out on others.

Experience Level: 5th

Combat Skills: Hand to Hand: Basic, 6 attacks per melee round.

Bonuses: +5 on initiative, +3 to strike, +4 to parry, +4 to dodge, +2 to roll, +2 to pull punch, 70% trust/intimidate.

Super Power Category: Mutant.

Major Super Ability: Shape Change.

Minor Super Abilities: Supervision: X-Ray, Radar.

Cause of Mutation: Accidental Exposure.

Education Level: One Year of College.

Scholastic Skills: Computer Operation (70%), Advanced Math (75%), Chemistry (60%), Biology (60%), Chemistry: Analytical (55%), Anthropology (50%), Basic Math (75%), Business & Finance (65%), Paramedic (70%).

Secondary Skills: Prowl (45%), Seduction (34%), Pick Pockets (45%), Pick Locks (50%), Card Sharp (40%), W.P. Revolver.

Appearance: Ariel's default appearance is an average looking Caucasian woman with reddish blonde hair cut in a style always a year or two out of date. She wears baggy sweaters and tight blue jeans. Her costume is a black body suit with a fine mesh of green fibers interwoven into it, giving it a ripple effect when she moves.

Occupation: Industrial Saboteur.

Weapons and Equipment: Doppler usually carries a .38 snub-nose revolver in an ankle holster with two speed loaders and a pepper spray dispenser. She will use her powers to avoid or flee a fight rather than enter or prolong one. She also carries a top-of-the-line lock pick gun that she replaces every year with a new one.

Body Armor: Her costume is padded to provide A.R. 8, S.D.C. 20.

Money: She has saved \$650,000 in cash and jewels stashed in bus terminals and safety deposit boxes across the country.



Deadshot

Real Name: Peter Nichols.

Aliases: M.H. Waters, Deadshot.

Alignment: Aberrant.

H.P.: 46. **S.D.C.:** 65.

Height: 6 feet (1.82 m). **Weight:** 205 lbs (92.25 kg).

Age: 40

Attributes: I.Q. 11, M.E. 21, M.A. 13, P.S. 16, P.P. 14, P.E. 20, P.B. 12, Spd. 18.

Disposition: Deadshot is straight and to the point. He speaks his mind and lets people have it with both barrels. He is strong-willed and opinionated, rarely giving in on anything. He is not a quitter, and has no respect for quitters.

Experience Level: 5th

Combat Skills: Hand to Hand: Assassin, 6 attacks per melee round.

Bonuses: +4 on initiative, +2 to strike, +3 to disarm, +5 damage, +4 to roll with impact, +5 to pull punch, +1 to automatic dodge, +3 to save vs psionics, +4 to save vs insanity, +3 to save vs magic/poison, +12% to save vs coma/death.

Super Power Category: Special Training: Hunter/Vigilante.

Years of Hunting Experience: 24

Education Level: Special Training.

Scholastic Skills: Pilot Auto (78%), Pilot Water Scooter (80%), Pilot Jet Pack (68%), Basic Math (75%), Spanish (85%), French (85%), Camouflage (60%), Detect Ambush (70%), Detect Concealment (55%), Fishing (75%), Land Navigation (72%), Wilderness Survival (85%), Track Animals (60%), Hunting, Identify Plants and Fruits (65%), Carpentry (65%), Tracking (65%), Disguise (55%), Find Contraband (62%), Intelligence (68%), Streetwise (58%), Basic Radio (65%), Surveillance Systems (50%), Prowl (47%), Disguise Scent (78%), Trap/Snare Animals (78%), Modify Weapon Cartridges (78%), W.P. Knife, W.P. Automatic Pistol, W.P. Rifle, W.P. Automatic Rifle, W.P. Sharpshooter-Automatic Pistols.

Secondary Skills: Pilot Truck (56%), First Aid (65%), Recognize Weapon Quality (45%), Climbing (60%), Body Building, Swimming (70%), Basic Electronics (50%), Computer Operation (60%).

Appearance: Peter is a stocky, well-muscled Marine with a clean shaven square jaw and a knife scar on his cheek. He has blonde hair that he keeps trimmed to regulation and walks with perfect posture. When not on a mission, he favors muscle shirts and blue jeans, but wears a suit of custom body armor as his costume.

Occupation: Assassin, Industrial Saboteur, Hunter.

Weapons and Equipment: Deadshot carries 2 custom-built automatic pistols and custom automatic rifle. He also carries 4 tear gas grenades and 4 knockout gas grenades, and a USMC Ka-Bar knife. He has a large selection of hunting rifles and handguns in his home.

SSR-87 (Sarcodyne Security Rifle Model 87)

Developed specifically for the security forces at the Sarcodyne complex, the SSR is an experimental caseless rifle. It fires a 10mm projectile that is atop the compressed propellant with a combustible cap at the rear. It is capable of firing single shots, semi-automatic fire and fully automatic fire. The rifle comes complete with a 3x-9x variable power scope. With the collapse of Sarcodyne and the parent company, SMS, some of these high tech rifles have made their way to the street. The ammunition

must either be purchased from existing stockpiles on the street, or custom manufactured by someone who knows what they are doing.

Country: United States, **Cartridge:** 10mm Caseless, **Feed:** Dual feed 25 round box magazines, **Weight:** 6 lbs (2.7 kg), **Barrel Length:** 21.25 inches (54 cm), **Muzzle Velocity:** 850 m/s, **Approx. Effective Range:** 1000 feet (304.8 m), **Damage:** 4D6, **Cost:** \$900. The price will vary, but \$900 is a good average price on the street, if it can be found.

SSP-90 (Sarcodyne Security Pistol Model 90)

Developed in conjunction with the rifle, the SSP is a complement to the SSR. It fires the same 10mm caseless round and is capable of firing single shots, semi-automatic or can be set for fully automatic fire. It is extremely reliable and outperforms the Glock-18 in fully automatic tests.

Country: United States, **Cartridge:** 10mm Caseless, **Feed:** 15 round box magazine, **Weight:** 1 lb, 5 oz. (0.58 kg), **Barrel Length:** 4.19 inches (10.6 cm), **Muzzle Velocity:** 350m/s, **Approx. Effective Range:** 150ft. (45.7 m), **Damage:** 4D6, **Cost:** \$1200. The price will vary, but \$1200 is a good average price on the street.

Vehicle: He owns two pickup trucks, one under the name M.H. Waters, and one is unregistered with false tags.

Body Armor: He wears a suit of custom crafted and fitted body armor that he kept from Sarcodyne. It is a fully environmental hard suit with a short-wave radio built into the helmet.

SSA "Guardman"

Full Environmental Body Armor

The SSA armor was designed and built by a chemicals manufacturing subsidiary of SMS, and was in "field" testing at the Sarcodyne complex. The Guardsman was to be the first showcase model in a line of new products that SMS was going to include in a military package to the Defense Department that included the Lazarus Serum. It is composed of hard ceramics with kevlar-impregnated seams and joints to allow for maximum mobility. Deadshot's personal suits are black with gray highlights, but the original Sarcodyne suits were painted dark green with black highlights.

A.R. 17, **S.D.C.** 280.

Weight: 15 lbs (6.75 kg).

Features: Independent air supply: 3 hours, toxic filter, passive nightvision.

Also has a detachable jetpack system: WS-12 High Velocity Mini Jet Pack (see page 84, *Villains Unlimited*™ for details).

Cybernetics: During his time with SMS Security, he was implanted with a Toxic Filter in his lungs, a network of Air Pressure Detectors, and an Electro-Stun Weapon. The Toxic Filter will screen out most poisonous gases and has an 80% chance of filtering out nerve agents. The Air Pressure Detectors were implanted in a grueling procedure and provide him with the Automatic Dodge ability and make it impossible to sneak up on him from behind. Obviously, this ability is lost if he is suited up in his armor and the sensors cannot operate.

He also has an Electro-Stun Weapon implanted on his left hand. It does 2D6 damage and stuns the victim for 1D4 melee rounds. It holds 8 charges. (See pages 71 and 72 in *Ninjas and Superspies*™ for more details.)

Money: Nichols has managed to save a whopping \$2,945,000 by investing his money in Fabricators Incorporated. However, he is notoriously thrifty, and also invested in Personaware before they exploded onto the software market.

Contacts: Nichols has military buddies across the country, and can usually find a place to go to ground almost anywhere if he needs to. They also provide him with inside information, tips and occasional leads on jobs. Many of them will provide Nichols and his group a smoke screen, or the occasional backup should they need it.



Garrote

Real Name: Unknown, no record exists. Goes by Cain.

Alias: Garrote.

Alignment: Diabolic.

H.P.: 39. **S.D.C.:** 100.

Height: 6 feet (1.82 m). **Weight:** 135 lbs (60.75 kg).

Age: 21

Attributes: I.Q. 7, M.E. 8, M.A. 6, P.S. 28, P.P. 25, P.E. 27, P.B. 10, Spd. 26.

Disposition: Garrote is a cruel, sadistic, inhuman killer. He enjoys inflicting pain and gets a childlike glee from strangling his targets. He collects body parts from his kills, and displays them proudly in his hideout as his "art." He is quite emotionally unstable.

Insanity: Obsessed with killing and his "Art Collection." After a kill, he must take a piece of the victim for display in his hovel. He will go to any length to obtain a trophy.

Experience Level: 3rd

Combat Skills: Hand to Hand: Martial Arts, 4 attacks per melee round.

Bonuses: +3 on initiative, +8 to strike, +10 to parry, +10 to dodge, +2 to disarm, +14 to roll with impact, +3 to pull punch, +13 damage, +6 to save vs magic/poison, +24% to save vs coma/death.

Super Power Category: Experiment.

Major Super Ability: Stretching.

Minor Super Abilities: Adhesion, Nightstalking.

Unusual Physical Characteristics: When using the Adhesion ability, his hands and feet secrete a sweet smelling glue substance from his pores that provides the adhesive ability. This compound breaks down after 3 hours.

Nature of the Experiment: Deliberate attempt to resurrect a human being.

Side Effects: To use his powers, Garrote must physically transform into a tall, gaunt being. His skin turns pale white and he adds 2 feet to his height (0.6 m), 60 lbs to his weight (27 kg), +40 S.D.C. and +9 to P.S.

Sponsoring Organization: Sarcodyne, a medical research facility.

Status with Organization: Escaped, considered to be a criminal and hunted.

Education Level: On the job training.

Scholastic Skills: Detect Ambush (55%), Intelligence (55%), Wilderness Survival (65%), Escape Artist (65%), Pick Pockets (65%), Prowl (65%), Climbing (90%), Gymnastics, Acrobatics.

Secondary Skills: Body Building, Running, Swimming (60%), Athletics, Concealment (28%), Ventriloquism (24%), Art (45%).

Appearance: Garrote is tall and thin with pale pink skin. His limbs and fingers are longer than a typical human's are, and his skin is pulled tight on his frame. His costume is simply a green military jumpsuit that is tattered at the sleeves and pants cuffs, and hangs loosely on his frame.

Occupation: Assassin, Industrial Saboteur.

Weapons and Equipment: None, relies solely on his powers. His favorite tactic is to surprise his victims, disarm them and then strangle them with his elongated fingers. He uses the secreted glue of his Adhesion power to add to the strength of his attack, making it almost impossible to break his grip.

Money: He cares little for money, but has \$30,000 stashed away in a garbage bag buried in a local mausoleum. He will often burn his share of the group's income for warmth, and more often for fun.

Southern Medical Solutions

Before the government shutdown, SMS was a powerful scientific and industrial corporation based in Atlanta, GA. Originally a manufacturer of medicines, they branched out into industrial chemicals, materials and biological research in the 1970s. Several subsidiaries were engaged in animal research that preceded and established the development of Sarcodyne, producing several successful attempts at intelligent mutant animals. The fate of these animals is currently unknown, as all of the documents were destroyed and/or acquired by rivals and the government. Many of the specimens themselves were probably acquired in this manner, going from one company to another. Some probably "escaped during shipping" and were lost. Their chemical research divisions produced few advances in industrial chemical products but did, as noted, make astounding advances in medicinal chemicals.

SMS

Built using the Organizations format found in *Villains Unlimited*TM (pages 34-41) with some G.M. tweaking. At its height, SMS was a Level Five Organization.

A. Outfits: #2 Utility Outfits.

B. Equipment: #5 Unlimited Equipment.

C. Weapons: #5 The Arsenal. Includes Biological and Chemical warfare weapons.

D. Bionics and Cybernetics: #5 The Bionic Arsenal. Highly advanced in human replacement and augmentation research.

E. Vehicles: #3 Fleet Vehicles.

F. Communications: #4 Computerized.

G. Offices and Hideouts #3 National.

H. Military Power: #4 Private Army.

I. Super Powered Operatives: #2 Freelance.

J. Sponsor: #3 Private Industry. Is partially funded through Government contracts but the company infrastructure is in private hands.

K. Special Budget: #4 Large Loans.

L. Administrative Control: #3 Free Hand. Mostly through bribes of community officials and investors.

M. Internal Security: #6 Impregnable.

N. External Infiltration: #3 Information Source.

O. Research and Information Gathering: #3 Good Connections.

P. Credentials: #3 Faceless. To most people, they are just another scientific research company. Conversely, after the breakup of the company in 1991, it will be known as a reviled #6 organization.

Q. Salary: #5 Excellent. SMS pays extremely well for top talent able to work on the cutting edge.

SMS total points spent: 343.

The Lazarus Serum

The following rules are provided for G.M.s and players interested in creating characters and NPCs empowered by the Serum. A word of caution: characters exposed to the Serum are likely to

have one insanity if not more, and are encouraged only for players and G.M.s interested in that level of character difficulty. Furthermore, characters with a Sarcodyne background will have been subjected to horrific experimentation and are likely to suffer from the experience.

As earlier described, the Lazarus Serum was an experimental compound intended to reanimate dead tissue and return the deceased to life. The Serum had its beginnings in the animal experiments performed by SMS in the late 1970s. Originally interested in the regenerative qualities of certain reptiles and sea creatures, SMS experimented heavily in transferring that ability to mammalian test subjects. Their success in the early 1980s prompted them to further the research by adding nuclear medicinal methods to the compound, and after heavy doses of radiation, the Serum was found to be moderately successful at not just generating new tissue, but revitalizing dead tissue. In addition, there was the wholly unexpected side effect of granting superhuman abilities. There was not enough research to determine if the mutations were the result of the Serum, or if the Serum awakened latent genetic predisposition in the subjects. With the 100% ratio of successful subjects to powers, it was thought to be the Serum. However, the company was dismantled before testing could be done on a statistically viable population. The subjects that responded to the treatment were reanimated with fully healed tissues, however the repairs were wholesale: no memories or experiences of their past lives awoke with them aside from the occasional flash. SMS proceeded with the formation of Sarcodyne, and moved fully into the realm of human experimentation. The "First Family" was the company's primary test model, though there were doubtless other experimental batches.

The Serum works on a principle of alteration and metamorphosis, consequently there is a limited window of powers and effects that it has on tissue. Only abilities that stress alteration result from exposure to the Serum. Table C for Experiment characters, page 116, and Step Four for Mutant characters, page 161 of *Heroes Unlimited™, 2nd Edition*, are acceptable for determining the number of Super Abilities, and the random tables for determining Minor Super Abilities are adequate for Lazarus Serum subjects. However, the following table should be consulted for determining Major Super Abilities granted by exposure to the Serum.

Major Super Abilities:

01-08: Alter Physical Structure (Roll on sub-table, page 228, *Heroes Unlimited™, 2nd Edition*.)

09-16: Stretching

17-20: Intangibility

21-25: Mimic

26-34: Growth (NT)

35-40: Chameleon

41-45: Lycanthropy (NT)

46-53: Shrink (NT)

54-60: Alter Metabolism

61-66: Animal Metamorphosis (NT)

67-76: Shape Change (NT)

77-85: Bio-Armor

95-99: Copy Physical Structure

86-94: Bio-Ghost

00: Immortality (NT)

Side Effects

The Lazarus Serum also has two nearly universal side effects. First, in order for the character's Major Super Abilities to activate, the character must undergo a minor physical transformation. See *Heroes Unlimited™, 2nd Edition*, page 116, Table D, 41-47. This side effect is present in both Experiment and Mutant characters and serves as the Unusual Physical Characteristic in those characters. Characters possessing a Major Super Ability from above marked (NT), No Transformation, do not suffer from this effect and should roll for one randomly. The second side effect is the predisposition toward a random insanity. The shock to the psyche of reanimation and adaptation to the new workings of the body is an incredibly strong one. Consequently, Lazarus Serum characters must roll percentile dice on the following table to determine if any insanities develop due to the treatment. If any do develop, G.M.s should discuss any appropriate to the character's background, or roll randomly on the tables provided in *Heroes Unlimited™, 2nd Edition*.

01-05: Three Insanities.

27-87: One Insanity.

06-26: Two Insanities.

88-00: No Insanity.

Even if the character does not develop an insanity, they are still haunted by periodic flashes of their former lives in their dreams and the odd occasional waking experiences. It can be extremely unsettling to a character to smile at the smell of a perfume, and have a warm feeling of a safe place, but not have any context to place the sensation.

Intertell

Founded by Latch, Intertell is currently run by company President Jim Dobbs, Senior Vice-President Langdon Fagan and Junior Vice-President Randy Carter. They are leading suppliers of computer software to the local police departments and major manufacturing corporations. They are also leaders in the field of small business software, and are moving well into the field of Artificial Intelligence. Their entire operation is housed in two buildings in Software Valley, outside the bustling metropolis of Westside City.

Intertell Software Corporation

Built using the Organizations format found in *Villains Unlimited™* (pages 34-41) with some G.M. tweaking. A Level Three Organization:

A. Outfits: #1 None.

B. Equipment: #4 Electronic Supplies.

C. Weapons: #1 None.

D. Bionics and Robotics: #2 Basic Systems.

E. Vehicles: #3 Fleet Vehicles. Company cars and a private helicopter.

F. Communications: #4 Computerized.

G. Offices and Hideouts: #2 Urban. The entire company is housed in two buildings in a part of a larger industrial park.

H. Military Power: #2 Security Guards. Most are unarmed. Only one guard in each building carries a service revolver.

I. Super Powered Operatives: #1 None, at the start of the adventure.

J. Sponsorship: #3 Private Industry.

K. Special Budget: #2 Nickels and Dimes.

L. Administrative Control: #1 Rigid Laws. The management would never think of breaking any laws.

M. Internal Security: #3 Tight. This will eventually be upgraded to #6 after the course of the adventures, but only after paying a very high price.

N. External Infiltration: #3 Information Source. They generally keep tabs on what the competition is doing but never go as far as stealing actual data.

O. Research and Information Gathering: #5 Superior Connections. The company is highly interested in staying on the cutting edge of information and the associated technology.

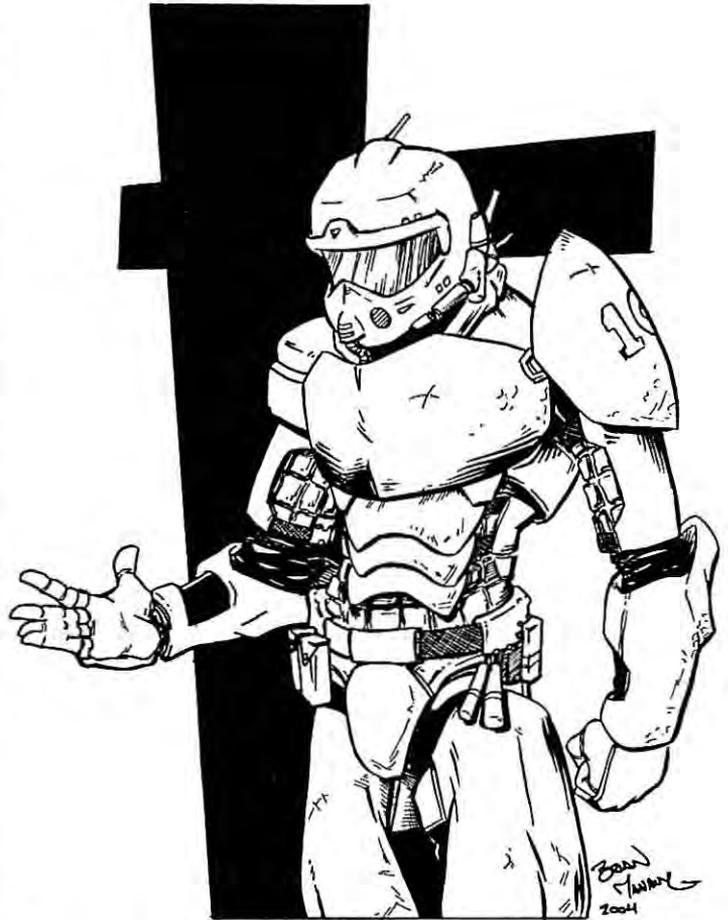
P. Credentials: #5 Recognized. Intertell is a household word in the business sector and consequently carries over into the public. Their plans to branch into computer games might even push them over into #6 if they are successful in that market.

Q. Salary: #4 Good. They pay reasonably, same as the average competition.

Intertell Software total points spent: 166.

Outsourcing for the G.M.

Game Masters can use the information presented to run the actual Software Valley War as presented, or can adapt the material to fit into their own campaign worlds. The breakup of SMS distributed a wide range of scientific information to a variety of corporations and the government. All manner of experiments were performed, so SMS can serve as a great way to introduce a wide variety of character types with a common background and ties to each other. Mutant animals, mutant humans, psionics, experiments, robots and bionic characters could have been produced by SMS and the various research branches. Hardware, physical and special training characters could have been on the payroll, or even used as test subjects themselves. Aliens and magic could certainly also have had a place within the organization. There is also the major question of where all of the research, subjects and employees went after the company was shut down by the government. Surely the members of Corporate Solutions are not the only ones who have evaded capture. Player Characters can be those on the run, or be in the employ of those hunting down the fugitives. Not all fugitives have to be bitter, displaced malcontents like those from Corporate Solutions. Former employees can be seeking to atone for their crimes and mistakes. Former test subjects can be fighting to ensure no one has to suffer like they did. SMS even doesn't have to be a major factor. A successor corporation could be using the research for good or ill, with SMS serving as a detailed back-story and source for investigative and inquisitive characters. Perhaps someone has duplicated the Lazarus Serum? Depending on the G.M.'s desires, all manner of complex encounters can result due to the fallout of SMS, and perhaps we will see more in future supplemental material.



Adventure Section

The Software Valley War is presented as a series of outlines to allow G.M.s maximum flexibility in running the adventures. The adventures range from low-key cloak and dagger, to a full-sized stand-up fight conclusion, so there should be a little something for everyone over the course of the games. Enough talk, on with the action!

Notable NPCs

The following are notable NPCs that the G.M. might find useful when running the adventure.

Robert McManus: I.Q. 19, M.A. 13, M.E. 12, P.S. 10, P.P. 13, P.E. 10, P.B. 13, Spd. 9. H.P.: 17, S.D.C.: 22.

Rob is a bright, young, 27 year old, member of Intertell middle management. He started out as a programmer and through hard work and determination was promoted into management. He is a soft-spoken black man with a flair for unusual neckties. His collection ranges from various cartoon characters to screen prints of his sister's children.

James Dobbs: I.Q. 18, M.A. 9, M.E. 20, P.S. 7, P.P. 12, P.E. 10, P.B. 8, Spd. 8. H.P.: 24, S.D.C.: 24.

Jim Dobbs is a tall, overweight geek complete with horn-rimmed glasses. He has scruffy hair but shaves religiously on a daily basis. He looks the part of a geek, but is a shrewd businessman and accountant. James likes to stay on the cutting edge of technology and is always on the lookout for new talent.

Dobbs does feel some regret for turning on his old friend Latch, but, business is business.

William Latch: I.Q. 21, M.A. 15, M.E. 10, P.S. 7, P.P. 10, P.E. 12, P.B. 9, Spd. 8. H.P.: 20, S.D.C.: 13.

Latch is a short, thin man with a bird-like appearance and thick-lens glasses that are just a bit too wide for his face. His mouth is constantly twisted into a sneer that projects his air of superiority. As a result of the accident, when agitated, he is prone to nervous, drooling fits. He is obsessed with cornering the software market and taking back his original company, Intertell.

Average Agents: I.Q. 12, M.A. 12, M.E. 15, P.S. 17, P.P. 18, P.E. 16, P.B. 11, Spd. 20. H.P.: 30, S.D.C.: 50.

The average corporate agent sent to investigate claims of SMS technology will lay low and wait for an opportunity to take action. Most, 85%, will have superpowers, mostly offensive in nature. They will not risk alerting their quarry too soon. Their orders are to capture, not kill, and they will go to great lengths to accomplish this, working with whomever can help them accomplish their goals. Weapons: typically a handgun and a powerful stun gun if they are not super powered agents. Have access to a wide variety of special weapons and equipment should they need it. Takes approximately 8 hours for a special order to be filled from their companies.

The average Government agent sent to keep tabs on the situation will typically be members of S.C.R.E.T. gathering intelligence on the large number of super powered beings in the area. Other agencies are also doubtless involved. They will only take direct action against characters and NPCs with ties to SMS; all others will be tracked and apprehended at a later time when they can be isolated after the events unfolding have quieted down.

Average Environmentalist: I.Q. 15, M.A. 12, M.E. 12, P.S. 10, P.P. 11, P.E. 15, P.B. 12, Spd. 15. H.P.: 20, S.D.C.: 20.

The average environmentalist is a 19-year-old college student who has taken time away from hitting the books to make their non-violent voice of protest heard. Some of them believe that non-violence takes the form of shattered windows, graffiti, and other forms of vandalism. They are truly misguided by their leader, the mysterious "Reggie," and are as much innocent victims here as the everyday employees of the companies at the center of things. Depending on how the characters react to them, environmentalist NPCs can be helpful allies, or bitter enemies as devious as Corporate Solutions. They can make great red herrings, distractions and annoying complications for the heroes. How exactly do heroes with super powers contend with normal, driven, politically minded citizens as the "villains"? Surely they wouldn't turn their powers against normals, would they?

Introductory Adventure: "Culling the Corporate Ladder"

Intertell, a major software company, suffers several devastating blows that appear to be more than just coincidence and bad luck. The characters are drawn into a wider conflict and find out that business as usual in the software industry is a Cold War of its own.

Section One

Originally just a story of local interest, a rash of mishaps at Intertell becomes national news.

1) A rival company, Personaware, acquired a contract by a major manufacturing company after the new Intertell software trial period proved to have fatal flaws in its execution. Strangely, the programming defect never appeared in systems of other companies using Intertell's software, nor has it ever occurred again.

2) An employee, sneaking a cigarette, accidentally sets fire to a records room which destroys a large wing of Intertell's primary research building. A glitch in the fire suppression system prevented the activation of the extinguishers until the fire was out of control. Despite being caught on tape, the guilty employee denies being in the room, and proclaims that he has never smoked in his entire life.

3) An environmental/anti-globalization group has chosen Intertell as its most recent target of protests for selling software to "big business." They have staged routine sit-ins and disrupted daily operations on several occasions. Recent acts have stepped up to destructive vandalism. A recent article written by Erin Holding in *Environmentalist Today* (see the description of Doppler above) has praised the actions of the protesters.

4) The local police have suffered a major blow to their computer network as their system suffered a massive hacker attack. It was discovered that a former employee of Intertell had written himself a backdoor into the software package used by the police department. All of the information regarding environmentalists working against Intertell was lost. Local law enforcement has since turned to Personaware for its IT needs.

5) Intertell Senior Vice-President Langdon Fagan was accidentally killed in a freak hunting accident in the wilds of British Columbia. Investigation reveals that he was mauled by a bear and not all of his body was recovered. No charges were filed against his hunting guide, M. H. Waters.

G.M. Info

Obviously, these events are all part of the concerted attack by William Latch on his old company, with Corporate Solutions providing the muscle. Inside operatives have played havoc with Intertell's product line and have cost them vital contracts. The environmentalists are fueled by the clever manipulations of Doppler in the guise of "Reggie," an environmentalist idealist new to the scene. An investigation into his background will reveal nothing at all, as he is a fictitious individual. He does get a rousing endorsement from Erin Holding in her most recent article, though, granting him some small amount of fame in those circles. Anyone wishing to contact Erin Holding at her office in Portland will hear a recorded message that she is attending a conference in Mexico and will be out of the country for a month. Researching the conference is quite a dead end. Doppler was also causing trouble masquerading as the smoking employee. VP Fagan was indeed on a hunting trip guided by Mr. Waters into the wilderness of British Columbia. His story, if he can be made to return phone calls or tracked down and questioned, is that Mr. Fagan was reckless, foolish and approached a wounded grizzly bear without making sure it was

dead. The bear tore him completely apart and then escaped into the woods.

Bringing the characters into the investigation can take on many forms as suits to your particular campaign and party structure. Presented above is an NPC contact, a member of middle management, Rob McManus, who can serve to bring the characters into the action. To personalize the story, Rob can be an old friend, college buddy, or former work associate of any educated characters. He could have been in the employ as a tech supplier for an allied Super Hero associate before finding work in the “public sector.” He could be rescued by the characters sometime prior to this adventure and remember how they helped him once before, and he calls on them again to help the company he works for. Regardless of exactly how Rob is introduced, he is the company liaison to the player characters and will be interacting with them on a regular basis. He’s no quitter, and stands behind his company no matter what. Conversely, the characters can be sent in as government agents to assess the situation. The government would have a vested interest in seeing that nothing happens to seriously destabilize the software industry, as the wealth of the nation rests on the power of its computer systems. More mercenary-minded groups of characters can simply be hired on as muscle to protect Intertell from all of these events coinciding at once. The possibilities are quite endless.

Shortly after bringing the characters into the investigation, another of the corporate heads of Intertell, Junior Vice-President Randy Carter, is murdered in his office; strangled to death. An investigation of the crime scene reveals the following clues.

1) If pressured for anything unusual, his secretary, Angela, will remember that he did complain that the air conditioner felt like it quit working.

2) Carter was strangled by what appear to be heavy, smooth ropes coated with an adhesive. The adhesive is liberally coating his neck and shirt collar, and thick rivulets run down his shirt and sleeves. Analysis of the adhesive reveals that it is an organic compound similar to honey.

3) Carter is missing most of his teeth; they appear to have been pulled out with great force. The inside of his cheeks and his remaining teeth are coated by the same adhesive material as is found on his neck and shirt collar.

4) There is no damage to the door or the windows. The ceiling tiles are undisturbed, however anyone investigating the HVAC ductwork will notice that it is seriously deformed in several places, as if something large pushed its way through, but even so, the ducts are too small for a human to crawl through.

5) Examining the interior of the air handling system will reveal that several sections have a slight coating of the honey-like adhesive on them. Following the trail of adhesive leads to one of the massive air handling units on the roof, where it is obvious that something forced its way into the system.

Section Two

After the murder of Jr. VP Carter, the company is in dire straits. Employees are not showing up for work, and some are quitting outright. A good number of them are finding employment with friends at Personaware. The President, Jim Dobbs,

decides to press on, asking for the characters to protect him from this attack on his company. He, of course, suspects that his ex-friend and partner William Latch is behind it all, but there is little in the way of factual evidence to connect him. Industrious characters will take the opportunity to lay a trap, knowing that an attempt on Dobbs’ life is most certainly imminent. However, depending on how much the characters have learned or deduced about the abilities of those perpetrating these crimes, their preparations may be in vain. It is entirely up to the characters as to how to proceed from this point. They can simply post a guard with him at work and home for 24 hours (Dobbs prefers this plan), or they can try and spirit him off to a safe house. This is simply a delaying measure, as Dobbs wants to try and salvage his company. He doesn’t think he can do that outside of his office. Whatever they decide, Corporate Solutions will be keeping Dobbs in their sights.

G.M. Info

Most assuredly, Doppler will be on the scene in whatever guise is appropriate to gather intelligence on the whereabouts and protection surrounding Jim Dobbs. While not the “trigger-man” herself, if kept unchecked she could pose the greatest risk to the characters by exposing any holes in their plans for Deadshot to take advantage of. The goal of the assault against Dobbs is not necessarily to kill him; just scaring him enough to get him to sell out his company is enough. Consequently, in the first real battle the party has with Corporate Solutions, if things start going badly for them, they aren’t going to fight to the death. What they are going to do is make it quite a show. This is the first opportunity for Corporate Solutions to make a splash, and they are going to go for maximum impact. All three are going to be on the scene and taking an active part in the fight. The plan will be some variety of Doppler creating a distraction to lure away as many characters as possible, with Deadshot and Garrote going gunning for Dobbs.

The Outcome

Should Dobbs be killed, the future of Intertell is highly in doubt. Latch will move in while the company is in financial and personal ruin, and attempt to buy it out. He has already attracted a lot of the top talent, ideas and material. To him, it is a mere formality to acquire the rest of the company. Should this occur, Rob will step up as the de facto head of the company and will rely heavily on the characters to assist him in salvaging it. If Dobbs survives, he will be emboldened by this overt attempt on his life. He will redouble his efforts in rebuilding the company, and strengthen its defenses against further espionage and attacks. The characters will be counted on to help in this matter, be it out of a sense of justice, duty, or the promise of cash. Latch and Corporate Solutions will realize that they hadn’t counted on any real opposition, and will shift their focus away from finishing off Intertell and concentrate on the player characters. They will have to be dealt with quickly because Latch has played his opening hand. Everyone has been put on notice: The Software Valley War has begun.

Adventure Two: “Aggressive Negotiations”

Since the characters are directly responsible for opposing Latch, he feels it necessary to take them out. He advises Corporate Solutions that their first priority is to eliminate the heroes helping Intertell. Deadshot thinks it is bad strategy to concentrate on one group when larger plans should be laid, but goes along with the plan, for now. He alone realizes that the exposure is too much, too soon.

Section One

After the smoke has cleared from the first adventure, there is a slight lull in the action while everyone regroups. For sticking it out and being a company man, Rob is promoted to Vice-President, provided that Dobbs wasn't killed in the first adventure, of course. They liquidate as many assets as possible and begin rebuilding Intertell. New employees are screened much more thoroughly, and the company has taken on a much more rigid appearance. There can be no doubt, Dobbs and McManus have learned from their mistakes.

After a couple months of lying low, Latch and Corporate Solutions have begun making their first moves against the other software companies. The environmentalist movement has begun to grow in size and assail the other software companies. Keeping up appearances, even Personaware has become the target of protests and vandalism. Everyone recognizes the pattern, but only the management of Intertell knows the source of the machinations. In response to the growing threat, some of the other companies have brought in super powered operatives of their own. Like Latch, some are hoping to take advantage of their special abilities and move in on other companies. Others have hired operatives as a strictly defensive measure. The government has taken keen interest in what is happening, and has started sending teams to keep an eye on the situation. Of special concern to the government, and certain private organizations, are descriptions of two of the known combatants. The suit of armor Deadshot wears and the weapons that he uses sound suspiciously like leftover Sarcodyne and SMS technology. Also, the elasticity power and honey-like adhesive produced by Garrote are calling cards to anyone familiar with him and the effects of the Lazarus Serum. Westside City and the Software Valley area are soon to be teeming with agents of east coast corporations looking for remnants of the SMS project, and federal agents looking for anyone still wanted for the experiments conducted at Sarcodyne. The recapture of Garrote is going to be high on the priority list of many of these agents, throwing possible allies on the side of the characters and obstacles in the way of Corporate Solutions. Of course, if any of the player characters are products of SMS experiments or have ties to the company, then they are going to be targets themselves, leading to an ever-growing multi-front conflict.

G.M. Info

There are going to be numerous operatives in the area, so feel free to pick appropriate NPCs from any of the wealth of printed

Heroes Unlimited™ material. There are about 9 different software companies in the region, in addition to other high technology manufacturers, so it is going to become a hot spot for super heroes and villains alike. They are just moving into position now; any major conflicts will be a while yet, unless the G.M. feels like pushing confrontations. The main piece of action is Latch taking a powerful, personal stab at the player characters for thwarting his plans against Intertell.

Section Two

Corporate Solutions plans on drawing the characters out into a firefight, so they can be dealt with before they can cause any more trouble for Latch and his plans. They also hope that it serves as a message to the other companies and the heroes that the area is starting to attract. They plan on making an example of this group. Their plan is simple and brutal. A coordinated bomb, a rampaging brute and a field of deadly machinegun fire will draw out the characters into another stand-up fight.

G.M. Info

Doppler, disguised as a package delivery woman, will deliver a box packed with a powerful miniature explosive to Dobbs' office at around 9 am. At the same time, a package she delivered to another part of the building 10 minutes earlier will erupt with Garrote unfolding from within. He will immediately begin to go on a slaughtering rampage. Deadshot will be set up in the delivery truck with a .50 caliber heavy machinegun trained on the entrance of the building to mow down anyone as they try to leave. Doppler will exit the building amid the confusion at the other end and detonate the package. Dobbs, his secretary and 16 others will be killed. As panic sets in, anyone leaving by the main entrance will be mowed down by Deadshot as he waits for the characters to make their appearance. He will then bring the .50 to bear on the first character he sees. After that, he will take to the air with his jetpack and make his getaway after continuing to spray the area with bullets from his automatic rifle. Doppler will conceal herself among the rush of injured and panicking people, falling into the arms of the first character she sees. When the time is right, she will fire her revolver at point-blank range into the character and try and escape back into the crowd, and again try to pull off the trick as many times as she can. She will then blend into the crowd for a final time to make her escape. Garrote will keep murdering employees until a character shows up to stop him. He will then concentrate on attacking any heroes that he meets. He will try to entangle their entire body, secrete his adhesive to secure them, and then suffocate them. Once he hears the gunfire stop, he will escape by hiding among the debris until nightfall, when he will slip away into the darkness.

The heavy use of firearms will likely complicate matters for the heroes, and could lead to severe injury and possibly death among the characters. Should the G.M. decide it is necessary to give them some NPC assistance, any of the other heroes that have been brought into the area could respond after the assault is in full swing. Also, any government and corporation agents sent to investigate the sightings of Garrote and Deadshot could make a play for them, diverting attention away from the characters.

The day after the assault, an envelope will arrive at the office of Intertell addressed to the new President Rob McManus. In-

side is a very neatly hand written note that says: "Compliments of..."

There is also a white business card that says: "Corporate Solutions. Get them before they get you."

Adventure Three: "Hostile Takeover"

Behind the backdrop of "Aggressive Negotiations," Personaware was acting to buy up any companies wanting to sell out. That number was rather large after what happened to the Intertell offices. The prices paid were fair market value for the ideas and infrastructure, so no one can say they were cheated or pressured into making a raw deal. Rather, they were pressured into making a fair deal they might not have wanted to make. Personaware representatives are scrambling from company to company making offers, and noting which companies might take some time to come around, and which ones intend to fight it out. The government and law enforcement have since gotten heavily involved since the attack on Intertell, but are experiencing massive computer failures across the board, which is hampering their ability to handle the situation. The environmentalists have decided that it would be better if they protested somewhere else, as it was starting to get deadly near Software Valley. Doppler is content to let them leave; they served their purpose. Posing again as their leader, "Reggie," Doppler tells them to keep up the fight elsewhere and they will see "him" again. The media has made it a nightly circus, and clashes between rival super powered groups are becoming daily occurrences. The situation is spiraling out of control.

Section One

Several days after the events of "Aggressive Negotiations," a team of Personaware representatives arrives at the interim offices of Intertell offering to buy out the company's assets. They make a fair offer for the rights, patents and materials, and offer employment to all who want to stay on board. The characters, all that are able, should be present at the meeting as both protection for Rob and to offer any advice. Two of the Personaware representatives are notable. One is a quiet, well-dressed woman named Ms. Kinnear, while the other is her bodyguard, a muscular man with military bearing and a knife scar on his cheek. He doesn't give his name. If the characters followed up on the murder of Senior VP Langdon Fagan, they would recognize the face as that of M.H. Waters, the hunting guide. This could perhaps be one of Corporate Solutions' biggest mistakes. Rob, of course, does not accept the offer and runs them off the property. Ms. Kinnear and her bodyguard give one last lingering stare at the characters before leaving the grounds.

G.M. Info

This section is not intended to erupt into combat, but if the players push it, it could result in a fight. Deadshot and Doppler are certainly not expecting it, but could still cause trouble if necessary. Deadshot is, of course, armed to the teeth under his jacket and carries Doppler's briefcase for her: her extremely

heavy briefcase, perhaps large enough to hold a certain folded up elastic powered super-villain? Given the certain danger to Rob and others, it would be best if the characters restrained themselves for another time. Hard glares and witty words are all that need exchanging here. This is more of a staring contest between Corporate Solutions and the characters to set up the big finale that is brewing, and to set up Rob to take the fight to Personaware.

Section Two

After the Personaware representatives leave, Rob is incensed and vows it's time to stop being on the receiving end of things. He wants to send the characters after Corporate Solutions and Personaware. Depending on how the characters feel about this, it can go several ways. Unless something drastic has occurred, like forcing Doppler to release Garrote from her briefcase in section one, there is still no direct connection between Corporate Solutions and Personaware. Doppler is a shape shifter and can come and go wherever she pleases with impunity. No one knows for sure that the man who was her bodyguard is indeed Deadshot. Sure, the characters may "know" it was him, but can they prove it? Garrote spends all of his time skulking around, waiting to be told what to do, and has probably never even been on the Personaware property. Consequently, they have little or nothing to take to the police. The government and corporate agents hunting Corporate Solutions might, if they are inclined to do so, be able to provide a picture of Deadshot, a.k.a. Peter Nichols, a.k.a. M.H. Waters the hunting guide, providing at least some legal justification for taking the fight to them. A long shot at evidence, but it could be the best they have. Corporate Solutions are supposed to be top notch, any evidence linking them to anyone is going to be few and far between.

It is really up to the characters. If they want to take the fight to Personaware, they can do so and G.M.s can use it to kick-start Adventure Four. After the punishment that has been dealt to the characters, no matter what their alignment, they will no doubt want some payback. The characters can also turn over what they have to law enforcement, but any information given will end up lost as they are still experiencing massive computer problems. Finally, they can leave Adventure Three as it is; a mental showdown that acts as a prelude to the climax of the Software Valley War. Cue the whistling showdown music...

Adventure Four: "The Road to Retirement"

This is the grand finale. While Personaware and Intertell have been fighting it out, the other companies in the region have joined the fight against each other. It has become a free for all melee of super-heroic proportions. Those companies that brought in less than savory super powered operatives have made a push to destroy their rivals.

Section One

Unless the characters have taken the battle to Personaware as Rob wanted, Crudup Industries takes the lead by sending its

hired goons against a rival company in an all-out battle. It seems somehow out of place, a war like in the days of the Unions vs the Coal Companies in the 1920s, if not for the seriousness and destruction that has preceded this day's events. The other companies take their cue, and open war erupts in the Software Valley as super-powered opponents slug it out. The military and law enforcement move in and are caught up fighting all sides, and quickly pull out, leaving the situation to resolve itself.

G.M. Info

Crudup Industries was recently "acquired" by Personaware and is set up to be Latch's patsy when the dust settles. Acting by proxy, Latch has ignited the spark that will allow for Personaware to dominate the industry, provided they survive the war. G.M.s, play this out as lavish, surreal, or powerful as you want. It's not every day you get to run a full-on super hero rumble. If the characters aren't powerful enough to go head to head with big bruiser types, concentrate on the smaller conflicts with militia and law enforcement. Maybe the characters are concerned with helping innocent employees escape. Perhaps they want to protect a news crew just trying to tell the story from the most unusual battleground in history. Or the characters can be out there, face to face with other heroes and villains, trying to restore order in a volatile situation gone bad. Whatever the case, the characters are indeed in the thick of it. No matter what they are doing, they are sure to have one final showdown with Doppler, Deadshot and Garrote.

The Outcome

After the battle winds itself down, the military finally moves back in and establishes martial law. The repercussions will be felt for years, and many heroes and villains will have established reputations for themselves. After lengthy investigations, inquiries, and various trials, at least two companies will probably have survived the conflagration: Personaware and Intertell. Latch, through Personaware, will go on to maintain a virtual stranglehold on the computer software market, thanks to Intertell's current state of disarray and the purchasing of the companies that were not outright destroyed. He will seethe that he did not actually accomplish what he set out to do, the acquisition of Intertell, and will spend time and money relentlessly against Rob McManus and his staff. Intertell will file claims on insurance policies, and use the money to rebuild and reinvest in itself. They will build on their programs in bionics and Artificial Intelligence, soon surpassing Personaware in this one critical area.

Corporate Solutions will, I would like to think, survive and make a getaway in the end. They can make excellent reoccurring villains, especially with the history they have with the characters. Doppler will, of course, vanish among the victims, as she is adept at doing. Soon, Erin Holding will resume office hours in her Seattle office building. She will be sporting a tropical tan from her trip to Mexico and the unnamed conference in the unnamed city. Neighboring offices will note that the number of contacts going in and out of her office will increase dramatically after she returns from her trip. Deadshot is a survivor and even if taken into custody, will surely have an old Marine buddy to

come bail, or break, him out. If necessary, he might even fake his own death. A few tattered pieces of armor in a blast crater, and who is the wiser? He's got other suits of armor. Garrote is simply too slippery to not get away. Even if he were captured, Doppler and Deadshot would work to free him. It's not the first time they have had to do so. After the Software Valley War, Corporate Solutions becomes somewhat of a household name among the criminal world. They'll have no shortage of clients for the foreseeable future.

As for the player characters, they will have made a lifelong friend and contact in Rob McManus and the company Intertell. Depending on the course of the adventure, they might have made contacts in the government and local and federal law enforcement, too. Where they go from here is entirely up to them. Personaware is still around; their friends at Intertell are still threatened by Latch and his near mad quest to possess the company. There are ample jobs in high-tech industry in the area, and Westside City is just over the horizon. What more could a group of super heroes ask for?



Fallen Angels

A Heroes Unlimited™ Story

By K. G. Carlson

Angelica closed her eyes and allowed the muted roar of the bustling city beneath her to filter through the gentle rush of wind in her ears. Wings arched gracefully from her shoulders, carrying the young woman aloft high above Wrightsburg. Below, her shadow fled swiftly across the city rooftops. Angelica opened her eyes after a moment, gazing down upon the city she now called home. Home was a concept she had only recently been introduced to, and it felt good. A lifetime spent traveling from place to place, no family, few friends and a sea of leering strangers had instilled a deep loneliness in the graceful young flier. But that was all behind her now.

With a wistful sigh, Angelica touched down on a tall building and her white, feathered wings folded gracefully behind her. Truly, nothing equaled the joys of flight, and a touch of melan-

choly accompanied each return to earth. Sandaled feet crunched gravel as Angelica strode to the edge of the rooftop. She watched in silence as the shadows of late summer lengthened towards evening, a gentle breeze tugging at her snowy white tunic.

The fifteen story Burton building provided a picture perfect view across the Laurel River into Trinity Landing, the heart of the town. Nestled at the joining of two rivers and surrounded on all sides by modern towers of steel and glass, the Landing was a living piece of history. Cobblestone streets connected the rustic 18th century buildings, some riddled with bullet holes from the Civil War. Tourist dollars and local citizens on lunch break looking for a quiet diversion kept the Wrightsburg Historical Society well stocked in operating capital, and its maintenance was a matter of pride to the people of Wrightsburg. Even vandals seemed to shy away from harming the buildings of Trinity Landing, and the only genuine threat of injury came from the springtime flooding of the Laurel and Madison Rivers.

A hand dipped into the belt holding her tunic secure and retrieved a small metallic device. Thumbing the activator on the comlink on as she brought it to her lips, Angelica signaled, "White Dove calling Mother Hen, come in Mother Hen."

Almost two miles downstream from Trinity Landing, with the turbulent Madison River adding strength and speed to the deep running Laurel, a building that had formerly housed a state of the art laboratory for Hawthorne Pharmaceuticals was now home to six gifted individuals who waited anxiously to hear from Angelica. David Hawthorne had ordered the facility retrofitted to provide an adequate headquarters for super beings to battle the forces of evil. Not long ago it had housed only Hawthorne's son, but recent events in Wrightsburg had its super human residents seeking shelter.

Jesse Wolfe leaned against a plate glass window, his listless gaze taking in the north shore of the Laurel River. Lori and Linda Sutherland were chatting quietly at a large conference table behind him, their bright costumes contrasting sharply with Jesse's slightly ragged street clothes. The red-headed sisters' costumes were similar, although the confident Lori's Aurora garment was more tight-fitting and revealing than the conservative Linda's Glitter attire.

On the far side of the conference table from the discouraged youth, the armor clad street fighter known as Frenzy was pacing back and forth impatiently. The west wall was filled by a large monitor and computer system, and the east wall contained the chamber's only door.

Jesse didn't bother to look as the door opened, but the heavy footfalls thudding across the room told him either a Japanese movie monster was invading the complex or Armadillo had arrived. Jesse's reflection in the window shimmered as the seven foot tall hulking figure shambled over and placed a massive arm across his shoulder. Fortunately, the spiky protrusions on Armadillo's hunched back did not cover his entire body.

"Why so glum, chum?" he rumbled in a thick Italian accent.

Jesse managed a shrug beneath the weight of his friend's arm. "I'm just tired of being cooped up in the complex, you know? I feel like a prisoner."

The last several months had been a dangerous time for super beings in the city of Wrightsburg. Meta crimes were on the rise, and anyone displaying powers had been approached with the ultimatum that they could work for "the Syndicate" or they could have a short-lived career as fish food. Several dozen super humans dedicated to the cause of good had been driven out of town or killed, leaving the super villains virtually unopposed. Mr. Hawthorne rescued a handful and brought them here to the sanctuary he'd built for his son, Brandon, who had taken ill several years before with a mysterious disease. This was the building where they'd used an untried and highly experimental treatment to save his life; the side effects of the operation had given young Hawthorne super human abilities. It was Armadillo, with a fine sense of gallows humor, who had dubbed their sanctuary "the Alamo."

"Cooped up?" Armadillo responded. "What are you yappin' about, kid? You got five levels here, a pool, a gym, your own room, the rec lounge downstairs is better than the Megaplex, the simulators — if you pass those maybe you can take one of the super vehicles out for a spin. A wealth of possibilities."

Warming up to his performance, Armadillo stepped away from Jesse, clutching one hand to his chest as the other beseeched the heavens. "Callow youth! So disaffected, so unmotivated, and the whole world is their oyster! What about poor Rocky? Where would he go if he left the Alamo?" He turned to Jesse and said with a wink, "You think it's easy picking up chicks with a body like this? It's a good thing I've got skills." He reached out a massive hand and clapped Jesse on the shoulder, nearly knocking the slender youth through the window.

Frenzy looked up from his pacing circuit, shaking his head in disgust. The sisters burst out laughing and cheering, Lori using her energy expulsion powers to create some low yield fireworks. Armadillo bowed, blew kisses, wiped an imaginary tear from his eye; fully in his glory, he plied his act for all it was worth.

Laughing despite his earlier gloom, Jesse leaned back against the window. When his abilities had manifested two years ago, most of his friends and family had distanced themselves. The fear and loathing evident on their faces raised a permanent barrier between Jesse and his former life, but at least he still appeared outwardly normal. "Rocky" Caparzo, on the other hand, was perfectly comfortable with his inhuman qualities, and faced life's challenges with an invincibility unmatched even by his stony physical structure.

Distracted by Armadillo's antics, none of the room's occupants were aware of the door opening again. A muscular young man in his early twenties, clad in a blue and silver bodysuit, entered the room, and was alarmed to see the conference room window shields open.

"Jaunt!" he shouted over the din. "How many times have I told you about the window?"

Jesse missed most of the admonishment, as he was so startled by Bastion's shout that his intangibility kicked in, tumbling him out of the window and toward the jagged shore below. His stomach lurched as he beheld the rocky shoreline rushing up at him. Responding instinctively, he envisioned the conference room and activated his other ability. In a blink, he was standing next to the conference table, startling the Sutherland sisters. Bastion had already moved to the control panel and the armored shutters were closing off the view of the river.

Frowning, Bastion turned to the group, noting Jaunt's return and said, "I don't think you appreciate how dangerous it is for you to be standing in a window like that, in plain view, when we don't even know who, or what, is hunting us down."

Jesse made a halfhearted attempt to defend himself, though he wouldn't meet Bastion's gaze. "Look, man, I'm sorry, but I just need to see the outside, ok? I've been stuck in here, what, two months now? The rest of you at least get to take turns on patrol."

"Buddy, you're only fifteen," Armadillo offered. Gesturing placatingly with craggy hands, he continued, "Patrol's dangerous, even for us old fogies. We want to give you a chance to learn to use your powers before you need them in a crisis. And right now the city is a very dangerous place."

"I know that," Jesse conceded. "It's just... the simulators just don't cut it, you know what I mean? Besides, it's just the conference windows; what are the chances somebody would be out on the river this close to the dam?"

"What if someone were *on* the dam?" Bastion responded, frustration evident in his voice. "Or the bridge? For that matter, what if someone were flying by? Three of us are capable of air travel, who's to say these killers don't have the same ability?"

Linda glanced at her sister, a pang of jealousy tugging at her heart; Lori had the power of flight and she did not. Lori didn't notice, as she was currently enraptured by Bastion, green eyes wide, and smiling faintly.

"What he's trying to say," Frenzy interjected, "is that if the bad guys found this place, they'd break all of daddy's toys. Then poor baby Bastion would have nothing to play with."

Bastion glowered at Frenzy's unwelcome intrusion. "Control freak that you are, I'd have thought you at least would have kept the situation under control! You do realize how foolish it is to have Jaunt and Armadillo standing before a large window, advertising what is possibly the only sanctuary we have left in this city?"

"First of all, Captain Crybaby, if you want these people watched, have daddy buy you a babysitter," Frenzy replied, strutting over to face Bastion at close range. "Secondly, maybe I was hoping they *would* be spotted, since I'm tired of hanging around this old folks home waiting for your ditzzy girlfriend to report in.

"I'd prefer a stand up fight to settle things instead of all this skulking around. Of course, I wouldn't expect a rich little snot like you to be the type to step up to the line and do what needs to be done."

"Oh, I see; we should go charging into the streets like a bunch of super powered cowboys for a showdown at high noon!" Bastion snarled, inching closer to his antagonist. Frenzy made it a point to give him a hard time, and he was getting tired of the constant harassment.

"Don't worry, I understand your reluctance. I know what it means to fight; Rocky over there, he probably does too. Hell, I bet even Jaunt had to throw down in the skate park once or twice. But *you*," Frenzy injected scornfully, "want to dress up and play super hero when the closest thing to fighting you ever did was on a prep school wrestling mat?" He snorted in disgust. "What a joke; Captain Spandex to the rescue!"

Nostrils flaring, fists clenched and eyes narrowed, Bastion was barely containing his rage. "Anytime you're ready to back up that mouth of yours, let's go. I'll mop the floor with you, you armor plated jerk!"

Frenzy scoffed loudly. "Not on your best day, Captain Hot-pants. Or do you consider your stupid little force field tricks 'fighting'?"

Jesse fidgeted nervously as the tension between Bastion and Frenzy built to fever pitch. He leaned over and asked Armadillo quietly, "Do you think we should try to separate those two?"

"Nah," Armadillo replied, quiet for him barely qualifying. "These guys need to sort this out on their own, and the sooner the better. Better they do this here and now, and iron things out, so we can work as a team when it counts."

The large console beneath the monitor screen beeped loudly for attention. Aurora jumped up from her seat, exclaiming, "It must be Angelica reporting in! Put the raging testosterone on the back burner, boys."

Bastion glared at Frenzy a few seconds more, then spun away and stormed over to the monitoring system. "That's right, just walk away, pretty boy," Frenzy muttered at his retreating back.

Turning to Armadillo, he said, "We are *not* a team, you got that?" Stabbing a figure at Bastion, he continued, "And even if we were, he most certainly is *not* the leader."

Armadillo did not reply, merely arching a stony brow in answer.

Aurora stopped next to the plush swivel chair mounted in front of the console, taking the opportunity to enjoy Bastion's approach and motioning for him to take the call. Confident that her tight-fitting costume was clinging in all the right places, she leaned back seductively against the console and flashed him a sultry smile. It was a wasted effort. Bastion didn't even acknowledge her as he hurried to the communications console, a faraway look in his eyes envisioning his winged lover. He dropped into the chair and she leaned up against the control panel, sulking, while Bastion connected with the incoming broadcast.

A slight warbling sound as the comm unit connected to headquarters was followed by a warm, familiar voice. "We read you loud and clear, White Dove. What's your situation?"

Angelica smiled and replied, "Not much, I'm happy to say. Caught some kids on a rooftop defacing a billboard, that's about it."

"Defacing a billboard?" came the tinny reply from the comlink speaker.

"Yes, its just a sign that summer's almost over and old rivalries are heating up," she replied, with a hand sweeping long, blonde tresses back out of her face. "Some kids from Southbend were committing the annual vandalism to Overlook High's banner."

A few moments of silence followed. Angelica silently cursed herself for mentioning the class war between two local high schools; she knew that Frenzy never let him forget that he'd been born to a wealthy family, as if it were Bastion's fault that he had not.

Not wanting him to dwell on unpleasant parallels, she continued, "One of them fell off the roof as I was flying by. I caught him, of course, but it took several minutes for me to convince him he wasn't dead. Maybe I should change my costume motif?" She heard an arrogant snort in the background that just had to be Frenzy.

"Other than that, it's been a quiet patrol. No signs of the hero killers, anyway." Angelica looked to the sinking sun. "It'll be dark in about an hour, so I'll be back soon. Let whoever is next on the roster know they can head out by sundown." She knew exactly who was next, and was relieved, along with, she suspected, everyone else, that he would be out of the compound for the night. "See you soon, Brandon. White Dove, over and out."

As Angelica tucked her comm unit back into her utility belt, she saw a bizarre occurrence out on the bridge from Trinity Landing to the business district beneath her. What appeared to be human legs were lowering from the bridge support trestle, attached to an impossibly long torso. She might have missed it, but she was blessed with sharp eyesight; a useful gift for one who soars above the earth.

Dangling for a moment, they touched down on the roof of a slowly moving box truck and the torso snapped down an upper body like a rubber band. The form resumed a normal human shape as the being crouched down on the roof of the truck. With a powerful stroke of her feathered wings, Angelica lofted into the air and began following the truck and its mysterious passenger.

"Brandon?!?!!" Frenzy exclaimed. "Good God, your parents must have *wanted* you to grow up and become a pansy."

Bastion slowly swivelled the chair around to face the renewed antagonism of the most recent tenant in the building. He'd had about enough of the loudmouthed troublemaker who constantly berated the provider and the family of the man that had given him safe haven.

Frenzy, on the other hand, never tired of putting the pampered elite in their place. Seeing that he was successful in irritating the little cream puff, he continued to apply some pressure.

"Maybe I should change my costume," he mocked in a high falsetto. "Why bother? It's not as if the whole 'angel' thing has been done to death."

Bastion fairly leaped out of the seat, eyes blazing, and an instant later was nose to faceplate with Frenzy. "Maybe she should be inspired by your originality, right? The angry black man, *that's* never been done before."

Armored mask concealing a feral grin, Frenzy crowed, "That's African-American to you, Captain Whitebread. While you and the Blonde Canary have been knocking boots down on level three, squirting out little blond haired, blue eyed Aryans, and bathing 'em in Benjamins, I've been working hard to get the respect I deserve. Nobody handed *me* anything."

Bastion rapped a knuckle hard against the armored chest of his opponent, staggering him back a step. Frenzy realized that superhuman strength may be among the rich boy's abilities and readied himself to deal with that unexpected reality should this confrontation come to blows. "Oh, really? So how hard, exactly, did you work to pay for this suit of armor? Or did you just decide that you deserved it and helped yourself?"

Frenzy's earlier joy at stinging the pompous prima donna evaporated quickly. "This was given to me by the *original* Frenzy, you worthless little leotard-wearin' ballerina! While you were sipping tea with your pinky sticking out and playing tennis with Buffy and Biff, I was out there in the city, fightin' just to survive!

"That's when my— the man who created this armor and wore it forty years ago took me in and taught me everything he knows. I *earned* it, don't you ever doubt that!"

Armadillo began herding the others back, realizing that matters were about to be resolved. The two antagonists were oblivious to everything but their loathing for one another.

"Unless you're ready to put your money where your mouth is, rich boy, get outta my face!" Frenzy attempted to shove Bastion away from him but encountered an invisible barrier about an inch away from his chest. "Well, well, well, look who's cheating before the game begins."

Bastion stepped forward and this time, Frenzy's hand made contact. "I don't need powers to knock you down a peg!"

Frenzy tried a quick back fist to the temple but Bastion ducked under, entwining an arm with the intended attack, grabbed a leg at the same time and executed a fireman's carry and rolled through to throw him to the floor. The impact knocked the breath from Frenzy and confirmed Bastion's superhuman strength.

Before Frenzy could recover, Bastion had flipped him onto his stomach and grabbed his left ankle. Holding on to Frenzy's foot for leverage, Bastion drove upward and slammed down onto his back with his forearm as hard as he could, driving the remaining air from Frenzy's lungs. Frenzy struggled to gain leverage, but his leg folded up behind him, heel level with his hip, prevented him from establishing a base. Bastion spun over 90 degrees and snared Frenzy's right arm and twisted it around behind his stunned rival's back as he moved again to a parallel position. Frenzy winced, but refused to cry out as pain shot across his back from the offending shoulder. Releasing the captive ankle, Bastion snaked an arm around his pinioned opponent's waist and calling on his superhuman strength, scrambled to his feet, arched his back and slammed Frenzy to the floor again.

While a skilled martial artist and street fighter, Frenzy was beginning to realize that he may be in real trouble here. His armor was absorbing some of the impact, but it limited his flexibility in a grapple. And as much as he hated to admit being wrong, the rich kid did have some moves.

Still in control, Bastion released the arm and waist hold, quickly spun over while turning Frenzy and secured him in a cross face cradle. His innate strength allowed him to again stand up with his opponent struggling feebly and slam him to the ground.

This time a groan did slip past Frenzy's lips and his vision blurred a bit as he nearly slipped into unconsciousness. Bastion released his hold and disentangled himself.

The others crept carefully around the conference table as Bastion stood up. Jesse let out a low whistle. Most of the floor tiles on this side of the room had cracked; the same floor tiles that had withstood the weight of Armadillo's heavy tread.

Frenzy slowly propped himself up on his elbows as his vision cleared. Bastion still stood nearby, chest heaving more from

spent rage than actual exertion; he was capable of lifting a great deal more weight than an arrogant street fighter.

"That prep school wrestling team? Ranked number three in the nation, and I was its captain."

Bastion turned on his heel and strode towards the door. White hot fury blossomed in Frenzy, and with renewed strength he leapt up to his feet. Aurora drew in a breath to shout a warning but Frenzy launched a lightning fast leap kick that connected solidly with the back of Bastion's head. He dropped to the floor, instantly unconscious.

Glaring at the others through his armored faceplate, the battered warrior walked stiffly over to the conference table where a pitcher of water sat neglected. He snatched it up, stood over the rich punk, and upended the pitcher of water directly in his face.

He leaned down as Bastion sputtered back to consciousness, grabbing him by the lower jaw and turning his head to look him in the eye. "Out in the real world, we win by knockout, not by pin."

Tossing the pitcher over his shoulder, he stood up. Giving a casual wave, he said to the others, "I'm heading out on patrol. You know the frequency if there's any work to be done." Stepping hard on Bastion's stomach, he marched out of the chamber.

Aurora rushed to Bastion as he curled up, clutching his abdomen. Glitter went to answer the beeping comm system. Jaunt and Armadillo exchanged disbelieving glances. As she struggled to aid the aching young man, Aurora called out, "Don't just stand there, you two! Help me carry him to the med center!"

Jesse and Rocky started forward and Bastion waved them off as he struggled to get up. "No, just help me up. Healing factor... should be kicking in soon."

"Hey, gang," Glitter called from the comm board, "listen up. Angelica may be onto something."

Shortly after exiting the bridge, the box truck and its rooftop passenger turned into an alley near the waterfront. Angelica touched down about ten feet back from the edge of a building overlooking the alley. She crept up to the edge cautiously and peered onto the scene below. She was just in time to see the elastic person leap to the ground. The driver exiting the truck didn't seem startled; in fact he greeted him as though old acquaintances.

At this closer range, she could pick out a few more details. He seemed to be wearing a close fitting bodysuit of a shimmering black; in fact it almost looked scaled, like a reptile. Close to a dozen men in ordinary street clothes were hastily unpacking the truck and carrying the boxes inside while the mystery man and the driver chatted amiably.

Realizing the truck would soon be empty and the situation would likely change at that time, Angelica thought it wise to check in with headquarters.

"White Dove calling Mother Hen, come in Mother Hen," she whispered into the comlink.

A few seconds passed by before one of the Sutherland sisters, she wasn't sure which, replied, "We read you White Dove, but barely. What's your situation?"

"I'm about eight blocks south of the Burton building, where I checked in last," Angelica reported. "I need you to check the database on a super being for me." She paused a moment, waiting for acknowledgment that the computer was ready, then continued. "Male, Caucasian, looks to be about six feet or so in height, wearing a scaly, black body suit. The only power I've seen him exhibit so far is stretching. He was hiding in the bridge trestles and lowered himself down onto a truck crossing the river. He seems to know the truck driver.

"I'm not sure exactly where they're unloading, they went up an alley to the back of some building on Sylvia Avenue. I'll have to check the address later."

Back at the Alamo, the others gathered around the console, waiting for the computer to compile a list of matches based on the information provided. After a few moments a secondary screen glowed with four names that potentially matched Angelica's description. Glitter cross-referenced the names with any reported sightings in Wrightsburg in the last year, and all but one name disappeared. Glitter checked the profile summary, frowning; this one appeared to be one mean customer.

"According to the database, you're looking at Anaconda," Linda said. "Besides stretching, he's also very strong, very nimble and very tough. Wanted on fifteen counts of murder, all of them strangled or crushed. Police reports indicate he's been involved in the recent super-slayings."

"Angelica, stay right there," Bastion said firmly. "Aurora and I can be there in a couple of minutes."

An eruption of protest covered any response Angelica may have made. Bastion shook his head emphatically and stated, "We can fly rather quickly and be there right away. None of the vehicles are ready to go, and I'm not about to carry passengers into a hostile situation."

But I can 'port over even faster than you can fly there," Jaunt insisted. "In fact, I could take everybody except Rocky!"

"No way." Bastion refused to budge. "You're too young, and your power is unpredictable, even when going to a place you know well."

A tinny voice from the comm unit rendered all arguments moot. "Hold off on the cavalry charge; the snake guy is driving the truck away as we speak. I'll check in again later when he's stopped again."

The comm went dead. Bastion's fist dented the console. "Dang it! She knows better than to go off alone like this."

Armadillo, sounding unusually thoughtful, asked, "So what do you want us to do now, boss?"

Bastion stood motionless for a moment, lost in thought. Shaking his head in disgust, he finally answered, "Just wait for further contact for now. I'm going down to the vehicle bays to see how soon the techs will have something ready to roll."

He strode purposefully to the door, and paused. Looking back over his shoulder, he said, "See if you can get Frenzy on the channel and let him know what's happening." The door whooshed closed on his echoing footfalls.

No one was surprised when Frenzy failed to answer his comm.

Following Anaconda was no difficulty at all. Angelica flew in lazy eight patterns as the villain's truck crawled through congested city streets for almost an hour before arriving at Wright's International Airport.

The sun had dropped below the horizon and the stars sparkled dimly beyond the hazy summer sky. Angelica glided stealthily about 200 feet above as the box truck was given entry to the flight line. Speeding along unfettered at last by surrounding traffic, the now empty vehicle arrived at a lone hangar near the end of one of the taxiways. Two boarding ladders sat waiting, and a rather unsavory looking ground crew lounged about with a limousine and two cars parked nearby.

Wanting to be safe, Angelica circled around behind the lone hangar and landed softly on the roof. As she crept to the forward face of the building, she could hear the growing roar of an approaching jet.

The not so gentle bump as the aircraft landed was enough to wake the sleeping Shissan. "Sir," a call box mounted at the front of the thermal chamber squawked. "You asked to be notified when we'd touched down in Wrightsburg."

"Yes, so I did," he replied wryly, making a mental note to have the pilot punished for such a poor landing. "Has my thermal suit been repaired yet?"

"Uh, no, sir, we've, uh, we've been having some trouble with that, sir," came the nervous reply.

Sighing and amending the mental note to include the entire aircraft crew in suffering, he checked his reflection in the mirror. Appearances were everything in this line of work. He carefully combed his hair back from his rust red forehead; much as a hat would increase his comfort on this chilly mudball, it would not do to cover up those lovely horns that reinforced his identity as the lord of evil.

This specially designed chamber aboard his personal aircraft duplicated the conditions found on his home world of Shia nearly perfectly. To walk about on the surface of Earth however, "Lucifer" had to wear a thermal suit to allow him to endure the chilly atmosphere. An accomplished mage, as many Shissans were, he cast a minor spell to protect him from the harmful effects of cold. There was a difference, however, between safe and comfortable. He donned a thickly lined coat and gloves before approaching the pressure hatch.

Another bump indicated the ladder was in place, and Lucifer entered the sequence to unseal his thermal chamber. The nefarious assembly below could see waves of heat rippling the air in the bright lights nearby that kept the flight line visible.

Now fully in his persona, the Shissan strode arrogantly down the steps, looking at his latest recruits. He watched as they nervously arranged themselves in a ragged line. Strutting casually to the end of the line, he stood face to face with Anaconda, who shuffled nervously in place.

"Relax, my scaly friend," Lucifer reassured him. "You've worked for me before, and I've been nothing but pleased."

"Thank you, Lord Brimstone." Anaconda sagged, visibly relieved.

The red-skinned alien proceeded to the next thug, a scrawny male clad in leather and spikes. Lucifer looked him up and down, sneering, "Subjugator, is it? There's a special place in Hell for sick little monkeys like you. Serve me well and it will be long years until you must see it.

"You seem less confident now than when I first approached; have you found that your feeble mental powers are completely unable to read me?"

He chuckled evilly at Subjugator's obvious discomfort. In truth, his psi-powers were being blocked by a little trinket the Shissan had picked up in a backwater region of the Niamese Coalition, but there was no reason to let him in on that little secret.

"It's for your own good, really. Your pathetic mortal mind could never grasp the scope and power you'd find within," he said, tapping a finger to his temple.

Having reminded Subjugator of his place, Lucifer stepped up to the only female in the assembly, although it was impossible to tell by looking at her. The alien crimelord looked almost sympathetic. "Ah, Corrosion, my dear. Glad to see you decided to join the team."

Melted features gazed stoically at the demonic looking leader. A maw beneath the ruined peak of her nose opened and a sickly gurgle issued forth. Lucifer motioned with his hands, saying, "Hush, my dear. When our work here is done, I will see you restored."

Several pustules burst on the diseased looking creature and she sputtered happily. The Shissan stepped back lest any of the highly acidic spray damage his best coat. Corrosion could restrain the deadly reaction of her physical form, but any of the substance that separated from her had to burn itself out.

The last henchman in the line-up wore a black bodysuit with a stylized, spiky blue 'M' on his chest. "And, last but not least, Minion. Strength beyond strength, and redefining the concept of multiple personality disorder."

"P-pleased to meet you, Satan," Minion stammered, visibly shaken.

The red-skinned alien chuckled and said, "My friends call me Lucifer, but I have no friends, or equals for that matter, so you may refer to me as Lord Brimstone. As you have all wisely decided to work for the Brimstone Syndicate, let's try and keep everything professional, shall we?"

Lucifer made a discreet hand signal and the second door on the aircraft opened and began disgorging passengers. Looking over his assembled troops, he quipped, "Well, I see that the bad guys still wear black." Finally recalling what was amiss, he questioned, "But I note that Doctor Longtooth is not in attendance; tell me, where is the vampire with a Ph.D.?"

After a brief, uncomfortable silence, Anaconda offered, "Um, maybe he stepped out for a bite to eat?"

A blood chilling stare from Lucifer choked off a brief round of chuckles; sighing inwardly, he wondered honestly if he were truly the only villain with a sense of wit.

The two passengers recently debarked from the plane took positions flanking Lord Brimstone; one appeared to be an impeccably dressed normal human, save for the incredibly dark sunglasses he sported even though the sun had set. The other appeared to be a humanoid tree, with dark brown bark. Branches formed arms and legs, several holes were located approximately

where eyes should be, and a deep gash for a mouth completed the inhuman visage. Lucifer gestured to either side. "I'd like to introduce my chief lieutenants, Hollywood and Vine; I trust that I won't need to explain which one is Vine."

The Shissan allowed them a brief chuckle; it's okay for the boss to make jokes. "So then, I take it my orders have been carried out, other than a rebellious nosferatu?" Another nervous shuffle swept up the line, and tension edged Lucifer's voice. "Which of my commands have you failed to carry out? Vine is here to begin production of Powerball; I hope, for your sakes, the laboratory is ready to go."

A chorus of "yes sir!" prompted him to continue. "What then? You haven't eliminated all the do-gooders in spandex?" Averted gazes answered his question. "Wrightsburg is a small city, even by mortal standards. You had, at the start, perhaps two dozen to eliminate?" A faint sigh and weary shake of his head indicated the Syndicate leader's displeasure.

Anaconda slid forward hesitantly. "We did our best, Lord Brimstone, honest we did. Minion and me, we personally pulped ten of 'em ourselves. Some of the others fled, but there are five or six still hiding somewhere in the city. They started working together when they figured out somebody'd put out a hit on heroes."

"Most of them would be easy pickings, too, if it wasn't for the last two. A big, rocky looking mook and some guy that projects force fields put quite a few of our buddies behind bars."

He continued hastily, "Don't worry, your lordship, none of them squealed, honest they didn't."

Shaking his head in disappointment, Lucifer said, "I suppose I shall have to take care of things myself. The building's interior has been constructed to my specifications?"

As the Syndicate's henchmen nodded assent, he instructed, "Back your box truck up to the cargo door of the plane and unload my special cargo. We shall set a trap and see what we can catch."

Now Minion stepped forward, grinning boldly. "Would you like some bait for the trap, sir?" Responding to his master's quizzically arched brow, he continued, "I'm in charge of security tonight."

After watching the assembled villains for about ten minutes, Angelica was sure she was onto something *big*. Retrieving her comlink, she contacted the complex where her companions waited. She whispered hurriedly, "Glitter, saddle up the troops now. There's something going on out at Hangar 17; I don't know what it is but —"

She turned abruptly at the sound of footfalls on the rooftop gravel. Materializing out of the shadows were two men in matching black costumes; she noted they both had the letter M on their chest. As they lunged forward and seized her roughly, she realized they were in fact identical.

Both were incredibly strong, and she was completely helpless in their iron grips. The arm holding the comm device was wrenched so hard she would swear it was torn from her body. Angelica cried out in pain, tears streaming down her face as she watched a booted heel crush her comlink.

The two men easily carried her over to the roof access and hustled her down the steps. By the time they entered the building proper, the assemblage of rogues she'd seen on the flight line were there to greet her; much closer than she'd prefer to be.

"What have we here?" Lucifer strode confidently up to the prisoner. "Why, Minion, I believe you've brought me an angel." The Shissan lifted her chin to gaze into red rimmed eyes. "I was once an angel, too, you know."

Bastion sat dejectedly in a lounge on level one, across the corridor from the vehicle bays. His healing factor had removed his bumps and bruises gained in the altercation with Frenzy, but his pride would not heal so quickly. When his powers first manifested after the life saving experiment, his father had enthusiastically planned and retrofitted this facility as a headquarters for heroes. It was his vision that his only son lead those champions; the benefits of sponsoring such an endeavor could be enormous. But even the most carefully made plans often go awry. Brandon's mother's parting shot to her husband in her 'Dear John' letter read, "You always did have more dollars than sense."

One of the senior Hawthorne's technicians poked his head into the doorway. "Hey bud, you've got a call on the wall unit."

"Okay, fine. I'll get it." Bastion dragged himself out of the chair and into the corridor to the wall comm panel for this level. "Bastion here."

Glitter sounded worried. "We just got a call from Angelica, out at the airport. She mentioned something about Hangar 17, but then she was cut off."

Fully alert now, Bastion replied, "Assemble the rest of the team and get down to the launch bay."

Not waiting for a reply, he deactivated the wall come and strode purposefully into the vehicle area. This had been last on the list for the assembly crew, and most of the vehicles were still mere skeletons; one, however, was near completion. "How soon until the street sweeper is ready to roll?"

The technicians exchanged glances, and finally the lead tech replied, "At least another two hours. This is all new equipment, not even field tested yet. You gotta give us time, pal."

"I haven't got time," he muttered walking briskly to the elevator. The doors opened and Glitter, Aurora and Jaunt almost ran into him as they poured out of the elevator.

"Where are you going?" Linda asked as Bastion pushed past them.

"The sweeper isn't ready yet," he answered. "I'm going now."

Bastion stepped into the recently vacated elevator and hit the roof button.

"Wait, I'll come with you." Aurora brushed by her glaring sister. "I can fly too, you know."

"Not fast enough," Bastion replied, and said nothing else as the elevator rode swiftly to the roof access. He pulled the mask portion of his costume over his head like a hood and secured it in place. As soon as the doors opened, he shot into the sky, headed directly for the airport.

“Wait!” Lori repeated, huffing in frustration. Her top speed was a mere 50 mph; there was no way she could match his flight.

While Hollywood and Vine were getting comfortable in the new drug lab, Lucifer stood inside the reconfigured hangar with Subjugator, Corrosion, and Minion, watching Anaconda slowly guiding his borrowed box truck over to them. They could see by his expression he was quite shaken.

Lord Brimstone turned to Minion and asked, “Our little bird comfy in her gilded cage?”

“Just as you ordered; but if I may ask, why did you want her kept in the command center?”

“I wouldn’t want her to miss the show; she’s the star, after all.” He signaled Anaconda to stop. “That’s good enough.”

He gestured to Subjugator. “Run around back and open the truck door so Anaconda can park it. Quickly!”

The Shissan waited patiently for the imminent shock. He heard the truck door roll up and the startled gasp as his henchman stumbled back. A heavy thud followed and large, bat-like wings unfurled past the sides of the truck. Lucifer glanced sideways to enjoy the horror dawning on Minion’s face as a large, four-armed being stalked around the truck towards them, dragging two tails behind it. Its skin was a bizarre light blue with violet striping across its heavily muscled form. A single eye on its massive cranium glared out at the strange surroundings.

“He must be ten feet tall,” Minion gasped. He was unsure whether he should run or just faint dead away.

“Actually, he’s twelve feet tall,” Lord Brimstone replied. “But I wouldn’t talk about it where he can hear. You see, he’s something of a runt; most of his species ranges from 18-20 feet in height. He tends to overcompensate when his inadequacy is mentioned.”

“Eight...teen?” Minion’s voice faded as the giant dropped to one knee before his master.

“This way, Zaborr,” the Shissan motioned for his secret weapon to duck into the entranceway of the reinforced command center. Fortunately the double door construction allowed him to squeeze through.

In the lab, Vine was methodically assembling the necessary equipment to produce the drug called Powerball. This instantly addictive, metabolic enhancing substance was a derivative of Thilik-3, a drug invented by Vine’s species, the Sprekalians; Powerball had been adapted to affect animal life forms.

Hollywood was busy grooming himself in a small mirror; even among Kassans his arrogance was near legendary. “I hope we can soon depart this filthy little backwater planet,” he complained, giving himself a wink behind a darkened visor. The perpetual twilight of his birth world produced the only flaw in an otherwise perfect specimen, eyes very sensitive to light.



"Some of us are not as welcome in the civilized regions as you are, 'Hollywood'," the bark skinned alien replied. "Have patience. While the local currency may be worthless, precious metals found here retain their value among the more intelligent races of the galaxy. When we return to the stars, it shall be with enormous wealth filling the hold of our cruiser."

"I don't think we have much time." Hollywood finished his grooming and leaned casually against a table, watching Vine at work. "I think our red-skinned friend is starting to buy into this 'Lord of the Underworld' garbage he's always spouting. I mean, its one thing to run a scam, but when you start believing it yourself..."

Pausing to make sure none of the native Earthmen were nearby, he walked over to where the Sprekalian labored and faced him across the workbench. "Perhaps it's time there was a change in management."

Vine looked up at the Kassan, silent for a moment. Hollywood was about to continue when he noted his companion was now looking over his shoulder. "It's started," he said.

The Kassan turned to see the alarm light was flashing.

In the command center of the Brimstone Syndicate's latest operation, Lucifer stood casually before an enormous array of video monitors. Several showed a blue and silver costumed figure landing outside the hangar.

Only he and Zaborr displayed any semblance of calm, however; Minion and the unpowered henchmen manning the center were in full panic. Behind them, arms and wings bound, a battered Angelica slumped in the corner. Subjugator, nearly finished with his brutal interrogation, was unaware of the approaching trouble, fully absorbed in what was to him a pleasurable pastime.

"Aw, crap, it's the guy with the forcefields," Minion whined.

A horned head turned to regard him with disgust. "Bastion, I believe this one calls himself. From all reports, his strength should be no match for yours, and you are seven where he is only one."

Minion blinked in surprise; he created and absorbed his duplicates in a complex shell game to keep even his allies in the dark as to how many of him there were. He'd thought that he'd managed to conceal the fact that he could create as many as six, but the demonic figure before him seemed to know. He took some comfort from the fact that only the towering Zaborr was close enough to have heard; he didn't seem the type to gossip.

"Oh, I could take him if he fought like a man," Minion protested, wounded pride evident in his voice. "But he just drops a forcefield bubble around ya and you're stuck."

"He captured one of my duplicates that way. He was pounding hard at that forcefield, but it took too long. A S.C.R.E.T. van pulled up and they were gonna blast my double. Lucky for me I was nearby and dressed in my street clothes. The police cordon wasn't set up and I got within a hundred feet and reabsorbed him."

Minion chuckled nervously. "All they got was an empty costume."

Lord Brimstone made note of the almost paternal fear for the safety of his other selves Minion exhibited; useful information

indeed. "I've dealt with forcefield projectors before; the trick is to grab hold of them and don't let go. They certainly won't trap themselves in a bubble with you and once the body field is knocked down he won't be able generate a new one if you still have a hold on him."

"Okay, sure," Minion conceded. "But this guy is pretty tough to sneak up on. I mean, he flies, too."

A rustling of massive leathery wings provided punctuation to the smug look on Lucifer's face. A translator unit for Zaborr had been a wise investment; once he understood the language, his natural talents for dramatic intimidation were perfectly timed. "Oh, I think that we're prepared for that eventuality."

The Shissan turned back to the monitor array, watching as Bastion entered the reconfigured hangar complex. "Notice how he seems somewhat distracted? I believe he's maintaining a personal field right now. While that makes him harder to hit, it also divides his attention. It's those little details that can win the day; frontal assault is so rarely effective."

Lucifer counted off the paces of the approaching hero. "That's it, just a little closer... and, there!"

The red-skinned alien uttered a series of incomprehensible words and performed a strange series of hand gestures. Minion's jaw dropped in astonishment as a 10 foot wide, 20 foot tall portal shimmered into existence. Just a few feet beyond it, but moving slowly away, was Bastion stalking through the complex. At a gesture from Lord Brimstone, Zaborr hurled his massive bulk through the portal and the would-be rescuer disappeared beneath his scaly form.

Bastion crept cautiously through the apparently deserted hangar. Strangely enough, all the lights were on, and he could hear generators or compressors of some type running, but no inhabitants were to be found.

Suddenly he was hurled to the ground as something large bowled into him from behind. A tremendous weight settled on his legs and enormous hands seized him by the wrist and stretched his arms taut. His personal forcefield saved him from a bloody nose as his face was slammed to the floor. The young hero managed to turn his head enough to see the scaly, light blue and violet striped arm holding his right arm down, but was unable to see more than a large blurry form in his peripheral vision.

As Bastion struggled feebly beneath his assailant, two more fists began raining blows upon his back. Realizing his forcefield could not long sustain the sort of punishment this creature was dealing out, Bastion tried desperately to turn over; if he could see his attacker he could perhaps launch a counterattack. With the full weight of the monster on his legs, he was unsuccessful in shifting position.

After nearly a minute, Zaborr felt a slight lurch as his victim's protective shield collapsed. A last punch for good measure forced a cry of pain from the puny human and was punctuated by the cracking of bone. He rose up on massive haunches and rolled the limp form over, careful never to let go in case the little one was conscious enough to put up another field.

Bastion saw the room spinning through a red haze, and his stomach lurched as the creature hauled him up in the air and spun him around to face him. The lower set of arms that had smashed his defenses reached out and firmly grasped his vic-

tim's lower legs, holding him spread eagled before the towering beast. A single, enormous eye assessed him coldly.

But the massive paws that nearly engulfed Bastion's entire forearms did nothing to inhibit the movement of his hands. Brandon twisted his wrists to point at Zaborr and unleashed a doubled force blast. He could fire bolts merely by looking, but for a reason he was unable to determine, they were more potent when he pointed both hands at the target.

The invisible blast struck Zaborr squarely in the eye, staggering him back a step. Roaring with rage, blinking away the tears of his injured sight, he pulled down mightily with all four arms and raised a knee into Bastion's groin. The scream of agony elicited a wicked smile from the angry behemoth, but he wasn't nearly finished with the impudent little wretch. Twin prehensile tails snaked around Bastion's ankles. Lower arms free once again, Zaborr began pounding his battered opponent. A barrage of blows to the chest resulted in several more ribs cracking, and a lightning fast jab to the face sent a spray of blood flying from his nose and rocked Bastion into unconsciousness.

"Well now, that's all taken care of." Lucifer gestured for Minion to step through the portal. "Let's have a closer look, shall we?"

Gulping nervously, Minion stepped through and was instantly transported to the location of the brief but brutal fight. He turned, expecting to see a shimmering portal into the command center. To his surprise, he saw only the far wall of the hangar and the door the intruder had used to gain access. Suddenly, Lord Brimstone appeared out of thin air, grinning smugly.

"One way trip, I'm afraid. But we've no reason to leave in a hurry, do we?" The Shissan strode over to his towering henchman as he dropped the broken hero to the ground.

Several of Minion's duplicates arrived to pick up the new prisoner, followed shortly by Subjugator. Coolly assessing the four armed giant and his recent capture, he sneered to Minion, "I could have handled this, *without* help from the boss."

Minion glared stonily at him, waiting to mutter at his retreating back, "Whatever, you freaky little pervert."

Lucifer turned to Minion as his duplicates carted off the new prisoner. "I trust you can dispose of two do-gooders without my help? After interrogating our little angel, I thought it might be amusing to make her boyfriend watch her die first. See to it."

He turned to the waiting giant. "Come, Zaborr, it's time to see our new city."

Four massive arms formed a cradle that the red skinned alien climbed into, and massive wings lofted the blue-skinned monstrosity swiftly towards the opening hangar doors and out into the night.

Anaconda was just returning to the command center after running a brief errand in town as two Minions carried the struggling Angelica over to an unused corner of the hangar. Everything was installed and running, but there was plenty of room inside for expanding operations once the Powerball production was in full swing.

"What're you guys doing?" he asked.

The duplicates turned in unison and answered, "It's play-time." They continued dragging their unwilling captive to the far side of the hangar.

Frowning, Anaconda followed them as they headed over to join two more duplicates who stood guard over an unconscious young man who looked to have been thoroughly beaten. Off to the side, Subjugator stood sneering next to another Minion; Anaconda assumed it must be the original, since he seemed to do as little as possible himself.

"Almost a full house," Subjugator said. "Where's Corrosion?"

"Back in town," replied Anaconda. "I just dropped her off at the old headquarters. What's going on here?"

"Taking care of some unfinished business." Subjugator noted that the foiled rescuer appeared to be stirring already. Victims with healing factors were the best; it guaranteed that the fun would last for hours. He began focusing his mental energies to insinuate themselves into Bastion's stirring consciousness.

"Now, wait just a minute!" Anaconda protested.

Minion stared at him in disbelief, and his duplicates looked eager for trouble. "What is your problem, 'Conda? We've greased plenty of costumes before. I know you ain't squeamish about killin'."

"I ain't never killed no women," the scaly costumed villain insisted. "And I don't plan to start now!"

"Go then, you gutless worm!" Subjugator seethed. "Crawl back into town and keep an eye on our unpowered lackeys. You're about as worthless as they are."

He stepped over to Minion, who leaned away. "Go with him, make sure he doesn't do anything foolish. Your clones and I can finish this."

Normally Minion would not take orders from Subjugator, but any excuse to get far away from him he would gladly take. Eagerly stepping away, he followed Anaconda out the door and into the truck. He almost hesitated to leave his doubles back there, but they could fend for themselves. The little creep wouldn't dare do anything to them.

Oblivious to his cohort's departure, the sadistic mentalist channeled a bio-manipulation attack at the awakening hero. A loud groan issued from the victim and as he curled up in pain two Minions started forward to grab him. "Get back, you idiots," Subjugator growled through clenched teeth. "I have the situation under control."

Turning his attention fully on Bastion, he put the considerable force of his psychic power behind the suggestion, "You need to stand up."

Bastion struggled to his feet. Once standing, Subjugator used another form of bio-manipulation to freeze him in place. He then ceased the pain wracking the helpless young man; no distractions from tonight's performance. Leaning in close, he whispered, "Once we dispose of your pretty bird, then the *real* fun can begin."

Turning away and striding boldly over to the captive Angelica, he continued loudly, "You think you're better than the rest of us, don't you? Flying high above the earth, where you don't have to see the filth and misery the rest of us endure every single day."

A predatory gleam in his eyes, he leered at Angelica. "We won't let you get away with that; oh no, in fact we'll *show* you what it's like."

Reaching up to stroke her tear stained cheek, he half turned to the frozen Bastion and said, "You know, one of the *many* things your little pet told me during our earlier conversation was how much you mean to her. Does she mean as much to you? I wonder."

Sensing fear in the young man, the vile Subjugator enhanced it with his powers of empathic transmission. His eyes closed in ecstasy, feeding off the tidal wave of despair now emanating from his victim. "Delicious," he whispered. "Absolutely delicious."

Now standing approximately halfway between his captives, he rubbed his hands together in perverse anticipation of the night's activities. Glancing between the two, he said, "As a child, I often enjoyed doing this to flies. Unfortunately, I lack the strength to enjoy this in a hands-on fashion as I prefer. Gentlemen, if you would be so kind?"

The duplicates who had stood watch over the now paralyzed Bastion quickly moved over behind Angelica. She renewed her struggles as she realized too late what was about to happen. All four duplicates paused dramatically, grinning evilly at the immobile hero as tears rolled down his face. Subjugator drank in the shame and terror for a moment, then gestured sharply. The second pair of Minion duplicates pulled with all their strength and tore the wings from Angelica's back. The skeletal structure in her upper body was wrenched out of shape by the violent force, and several internal organs were punctured by the jumble of bone.

Angelica shuddered with pain, and blood began welling up from her mouth. Her captors released her, and she crumpled to the ground in a broken heap. The duplicates chortled wickedly amongst themselves, already practicing in the retelling of their deed.

Subjugator looked to Bastion, ready to take the game to the next level. "Your powers have left you," he suggested. "Your legs no longer work." Confident his hypnotic suggestions had taken effect, he released the paralyzing bio-manipulation that held his captive up. He laughed as the second of tonight's victims collapsed to the floor.

The five villains watched as the shattered lovers crawled feebly towards one another. Neither able to speak, their grief expressed in broken sobs as they inched ever closer. Their fingertips brushed and they gazed into each other's eyes one last time. Then the bloodied Angelica shuddered a final breath and slipped away.

A wretched moan of loss issued from the survivor. Subjugator stood over him, gloating. "Don't give up yet, dear boy. Our game hasn't even really started."

Bastion didn't respond; his blank eyes stared, focusing on nothing. Inside was a terrible, gaping emptiness, as if his very soul had been torn from him.

But just then, it seemed he could see Angelica once again. She was whole and healthy again, and smiling that beautiful smile that had captured his heart. In truth, she appeared more than just healthy; she was practically luminous. Bastion thought perhaps it was just an illusion, but Subjugator jumped as if goosed and spun about nervously.

"Who's there? I... I s-sense..." he cried out, visibly shaken. The duplicates looked around confused, wondering who he was talking to. Maybe the little freak had finally gone around the bend.

Suddenly the radiant vision was stooping over Bastion, helping him to stand. Subjugator was backing away, his face a rictus of terror. The Minion duplicates, unable to see who or what was helping their captive stand, exchanged confused glances.

"Angelica," Bastion croaked weakly. "You came back to me."

Her lips didn't move, but the familiar melody of her voice echoed quietly in his mind. *I cannot stay.*

He sagged against her, seemingly propped up on thin air to the eyes of Angelica's killers. Her soothing voice continued, *You must go on. There is much work to be done here.*

Farther across the room, as he backed slowly away but unable to turn his back on the bizarre tableau, Subjugator watched as the glowing figure embracing the young hero seemed to merge with him. He glowed briefly with a nimbus of energy that even the Minions could see. They began backing slowly away, suddenly fearful.

Bastion turned slowly and raised his head, eyes squeezed tightly shut. When he opened them, they blazed like the sun. A blinding beam of white light lashed out and touched one of Minion's duplicates, incinerating him instantly. At last Subjugator turned away from his former captive and fled as fast as he could for the exit.

The remaining three duplicates joined their brother in oblivion in short order, but the destruction didn't end there. A roar of fury accompanied the annihilating energy beam as it cut a wide swath across the interior of the hangar. As it intersected a high pressure tank, secondary explosions soon ripped through the building.

The complex machinery on the table that Vine was studiously assembling fell over as the entire building shook. "What in the blazes is going on?"

Hollywood rushed over and grabbed him seconds before the shock wave rolled through the lab.

Anaconda struggled to keep the box truck from crashing into oncoming traffic. Minion had suddenly gone berserk and started thrashing around, his supernatural strength shattering the windshield, sundering the dash, and breaking the snake man's right arm; considering his elastic nature, that had been quite a feat.

He managed to get the truck off the road without any collisions. He could see through the hole in the dash that the engine had also been damaged; they wouldn't be using this for a getaway vehicle anytime soon.

Looking over at the drooling, near catatonic form of Minion, he worried how he was going to make a getaway with a broken arm and a zombie companion. Just then, Minion blinked and seemed to snap out of his trance.

"He *killed* them," he moaned pitifully. "He killed them *all*."

"Look, I hate to interrupt your breakdown, but if we don't hot-foot it right now we'll be in lock down." Anaconda shook the babbling Minion with his good arm. "C'mon, let's get outta here."

Minion followed him as they slunk down the nearest alley; the sooner they got off the street, the better. Already they could hear sirens in the distance. While Anaconda kept careful watch for pursuit, Minion babbled inanely to himself, slipping further into lunacy.

Aurora glided over the fence marking the airport's boundary. She winced as the sun bloomed instantly on the horizon. Blinking away the spots in her eyes, she stared in mute horror as she realized the hangar she'd been approaching was the source of the explosion she had just seen!

Drifting a little closer, there seemed to be very little left of the building or the aircraft that had been sitting next to it. There seemed to be a few bodies among the wreckage of the airplane, but she couldn't force herself to go any closer.

"Oh, Bastion," she sobbed, and turned for home, her flight path erratic.

Appearing just outside the airport fence, Jaunt and Glitter popped out of the ether, but they failed to notice Aurora's departure. Taking in the sheer destruction that had been their destination, both were horrified at what had happened to their friends, and nearly happened to them.

Glitter turned away from the dying conflagration, eyes beginning to well with tears. She muttered softly and shook her head in denial of what she'd witnessed.

Jesse kicked a rock at the fence, not knowing how else to vent his frustration. They'd been popping all over town as he tried and failed to focus his nascent abilities and deliver them to the flash point. "God, why did I have to get stuck with a useless power like teleportation? If I could fly, or run, we might have been there in time."

"Foolish whelp, I find teleporting to be the most important ability one could possess; but like any tool, you must have the skill to wield it properly." Both young heroes looked up, shocked at the sound of an unexpected voice. About 20 feet away was a well dressed man wearing a very dark visor, standing next to something that looked like a Halloween decoration.

They were startled again when the bark skinned-thing turned to the man and said, "Let's go." Before either could reply, the stranger touched the tree being and both disappeared in an instant.

Simultaneously confused and amazed, Jaunt asked, "What do you suppose that was about?"

Linda could only shrug in answer.

Awareness returned to Bastion as the sound of approaching sirens reached his ears. He found himself kneeling in a relatively clear area amidst a sea of ruin. The realization dawned that he must have thrown up a protective barrier right before the shock wave swept over them —

He quickly spun a half turn, sagging as he saw Angelica's broken body ten feet away. He stared a few moments, lost inside himself as the sirens were joined by the steady thump of rotors. Spotlights stabbed down out of the sky and a loudspeaker blared, "This is S.C.R.E.T.! You are hereby ordered to surrender!"

He stood slowly and approached the body as one of two helicopters touched down and disgorged armored detainment officers. He gently lifted the body as they scrambled over the wrecked hangar and pointed rifles at him. "Freeze! Put the girl down and back away slowly!"

Bastion closed his eyes and harnessed his power; he had little energy left. He pumped what force remained into a barrier between himself and the S.C.R.E.T. officers. It would not hold against more than a few shots, but by then he'd be gone.

Willing himself to flight, he angled swiftly away from his pursuers. They cursed as their shots bounced harmlessly off the shield he'd put in place. By the time the second helicopter could swing around, the young flier had accelerated out of range.

A frustrated Armadillo returned to the Alamo and headed for the elevator. Everyone had taken off when Angelica's call came in, leaving him to catch up. No cab could hold him, but trooper that he was, Rocky had been hiking across the city as fast as he could to get to the scene; his team needed him.

He was making good progress until the police and local S.C.R.E.T. officers went into high alert mode. He tried without success to get across the bridge and out to the airport, but he didn't feel like playing 20 questions with the law.

Entering the elevator, he selected level five carefully with an oversized rock formation of a finger. It was then he noticed there was a sort of tacky feeling to the floor. Looking down, he realized he was standing in what looked like blood.

A sound like cinder blocks sliding against one another issued from his clenched fists; somebody would pay if this was a friend's blood spilled, here in their very home!

Planning to start at the top of the building and work his way down, he rode anxiously to the top floor that had been his original destination. One look at the corridor told him he was in the right place: drops of blood led from the elevator to the conference room. But scanning both ways, Armadillo noted the unused dormitory rooms on this level all had their doors hanging open. He could see footprints in the rapidly drying blood that indicated someone had been down that way also.

Since the dorms were closer, he decided to check there first. They appeared to have been ransacked, though being unoccupied, there was little to take.

Stepping back into the corridor, Armadillo thought he saw movement by the elevator! He lumbered quickly down the corridor but the doors were closed by the time he got there. The only room on the other side of the elevator was the conference chamber, so he charged quickly down to its only door, hoping to catch any stragglers.

The door slid open and Rocky started rolling through the door when he saw the shrouded figure wrapped in bed sheets, blood soaking through in several places.

Seeing a folded note by the foot of the shroud, Armadillo snatched it up in a massive fist, nearly tearing it. He opened the note carefully, recognizing the hasty scrawl of Brandon Hawthorne. It claimed the med techs should already be on their way up, and asked whoever found the body to contact David Hawthorne for the funeral arrangements, as the fallen angel had no known family.

"Baz, don't do anything crazy," Armadillo rumbled darkly to himself.

Zaborr circled high above the ruined base, Lucifer cradled safely in his four armed grasp. From here the police and emergency workers appeared like swarming ants at a neglected picnic site.

Lord Brimstone sighed wearily and looked up at his only dependable underling. "I suppose we'd better see what local accommodations are available." He despaired of finding anyplace warm enough, and resigned himself to frequent castings of protection from cold.

Hours later, the city-wide manhunt continued. As the only known witness to the hangar explosion, officers of the law were very anxious to ask Bastion some very pointed questions.

Three black-garbed figures peered over the edge of the Oberdorff Metropolitan Museum as sirens screamed past on the street below. Above, dark clouds were sweeping in, concealing the stars and moon.

"You gotta be crazy, pulling a museum heist on a night like this, Chuck," the tallest of the three said.

The shortest and stockiest of the three jumped up and smacked the speaker in the back of the head. "How many times I gotta tell you, *Cobra*, no real names on the job!"

All three stepped away from the edge and proceeded to the skylight; they'd already disabled key sections of the security system. *Cobra*, rubbing the back of his head and glaring at his short associate, complained, "Geez, Panther, I didn't know there was so many rules to being a crook. I always thought we got to *break* the rules."

The would be thieves stumbled back in shock when a fourth voice called out, "Well, you *did* ignore the rule of silence."

Vaulting over the skylight came a blurry figure, his nonreflective charcoal colored armor blending into the shadows of the night. Frenzy landed both feet squarely in Panther's face, immediately removing him from the fight. He then rolled to his feet, ready for action, directly between the other thieves.

Realizing that they were in trouble, one of the two remaining criminals stepped to the side and forward, and attempted a blind side punch. Ducking under *Cobra's* belated strike, Frenzy rammed an elbow sharply into his gut, knocking the wind out of the tall crook.

Looking up, he noted Chuck making a fast break for the winch line they'd rigged to get up here in the first place. He sprinted after the fleeing perp, unsure if he would be able to catch him. Frenzy poured on all the speed he could muster and leaped. He nearly overshot the last crook, but lashed out and securing a headlock, rode him face down into the rooftop. He tried to rise, but Frenzy smashed down an armored fist and turned out the lights.

Springing to his feet, Frenzy rounded on *Cobra*, just rising shakily to his feet. Locking gazes with the only conscious thief, he offered, "It's your body; make the right choice."



He zip-tied the criminal's hands and feet and dragged the defeated runner over to his companions. *Not bad*, Frenzy thought to himself. The balance of the new armor was slightly different than the set he'd worn earlier that day, but he was still on top of his game.

His mentor had been less than pleased to learn how that suit had acquired its spider web of micro-fractures. "You've got to put all that nonsense behind you, boy. I'd hoped being around other crime fighters would work that chip off your shoulder."

"How can you say that?" he'd argued. "You spent your whole career sticking it to the man!"

"If you recall, my career was short," came the long-suffering reply. "And while I suppose it's the birthright of young men everywhere to be angry, I'd hoped you could accept the wisdom of your elders without experiencing the lesson for yourself."

"Back then, we were fighting to resolve the hatred that divided the human race by the color of our skin. Later came the mutants, science gone mad. Since then, we've discovered that life exists on other planets, and not all of it friendly. I did some good in my day, but I done some wrong too. We got to work together as best we can."

"Besides," he finished wryly, "you could use a rich friend or two. There's only three more suits of armor left, and I sure can't afford to build no more."

The old man stepped to his left, adjusting the straps on the torso piece. "I've given you the tools of a tarnished hero from yesteryear; it's up to you to shine it up and be worthy of the title."

He adjusted the final piece of armor plating, thumped Frenzy once on the shoulder and proffered a hand. "Now go on out there and do me proud."

He'd grasped the extended hand and promised, "I will, Grandpa."

Waiting until he was several blocks from home, he'd reactivated his comlink. He wasn't familiar with the latest technologies and was fearful it could be used to lead his enemies back to his family. It was then that he learned what had taken place at the airport.

Returning to the present, he turned from the captured thieves and strode purposefully towards the support structure that backed the illuminated museum name banner. As he expected, there was a lurker among the shadows.

"You were less than a hundred feet away; weren't you gonna to stop them?" He challenged mildly.

"Didn't seem that important," came the listless reply.

Frenzy struggled a few moments for the right words to say; reconciliation came hard to one so proud. But he'd sworn a promise to the one person on this earth whose opinion mattered.

Unsure of the right thing to say, but eager to end the uncomfortable silence, he said, "I, uh, heard about what happened tonight; sorry I wasn't there."

"Doesn't matter; there was nothing you could have done."

"Bas- Brandon, listen to me, man. I know I've been hard on you, but you took it like a champ. And you stood up to me, which I respect you for." Unable to completely swallow his pride, he had to interject, "'course, you went down like a little girl, but hey, I'm the baddest mutha there is."

Chuckling, he continued, "I'm just razzin' you, man. It's cool. You gotta move on, though. Some of the creeps behind this got away. You're not gonna let them walk, are you?"

Bastion remained unresponsive. Frenzy stepped in closer. "Like it or not, this ain't over. Our team is counting on you. Those scumbags are sure as heck gonna make another try at wiping us out; if we don't stick together, they just might succeed."

"I'm a fugitive from the law; is that the kind of teammate you want?"

"Aw, man, that's a point in your favor in my book. C'mon, Captain Whitebread, let's go stick it to the man together!" Frenzy laughed, continuing, "I don't know what you're worried about, anyway. I mean, look at you, six foot two in silver and blue spandex, standing under a neon sign, and the nation's finest still can't find you!"

Bastion stepped out from the structural supports, arms crossed. "How did *you* know you'd find me here, by the way?"

Frenzy shuffled his feet and looked away. This didn't seem like a good subject to revisit. "Well, uh, back in the good old days, before us crime fighters went to ground, I used to do night patrol through this area and... I used to see you and your lady friend meet up here."

Bastion shut his eyes tightly and turned his head away, fighting back the tears. It took a few painful moments to regain his composure. Eventually he turned to face Frenzy again.

"Hey, man, you don't need to go through it alone," Frenzy offered. "I may not be a very good friend, but I know where we can find four more real quick."

"You did say 'our team' a minute ago," Bastion recalled.

Frenzy clapped him on the back as they walked over to the foiled thieves left by the skylight. "Hey, Captain Catatonic, you aren't supposed to remember that stuff! You were doin' that whole zombie thing, you know?" The bound thieves paused in their struggles and looked up at the heroes looming over them. "Whatta you think we should do with these feeb? Leave 'em for pigeon food?"

Bastion frowned at him. "No, I think we should call the police."

"Aw, heck, I thought you were goin' hard core. It's the return of Captain Conscientious! Besides, you really don't wanna talk to any nice, friendly police officers right now, do you?"

Bastion considered that for a moment. "You're right. But we should contact the police. After we leave, of course. Anonymously. From a phone booth. On the opposite end of town."

Frenzy laughed. "Alright! Now you're talking. Let's get out of here."

Together they walked to the edge of the building. Bastion's gaze clouded over with grief in the few quiet moments it took to traverse the museum's roof. Putting aside his tough guy persona and reaching out as a true friend wasn't easy, but Frenzy realized it was time for a change. "Don't worry, Brandon; you're gonna make it through. We all are. Together."

Looking skyward, the armored warrior saw that the moon had been swallowed up by thick clouds heavy with the promise of rain. "Let's head for shelter before we get drenched, Captain Stretchpants."

Bastion chuckled wearily. "What is it with you and this 'captain' stuff all of the time? Were you raised on a ship or something?"

"Nah, it's my trademark quip. All *real* super heroes have one." Frenzy punched him playfully on the shoulder, laughing.

Turning to him, Bastion asked, "Since we're all friends now, don't you think it's time you told us you're real name? Everybody else at the compound trusts each other that much, at least."

Frenzy hesitated; this wouldn't be pleasant in the long run, he was sure of that. "Fair enough. My name's... Richard. Richard Bailey."

Bastion drew in a breath to comment, but was cut off before he could say anything. "*Don't*. Even. Start."

Instead, he grinned. "Sure, pal. Let's go home."

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The Hammer of the Forge

By James M.G. Cannon

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Cast a Dark Shadow

One of the greatest perils of the Three Galaxies are the Star Hives. Although rumored to originate from somewhere outside Trigalactic Space, there remains plenty of uncharted systems that could serve as the origin of the Hives. Built upon a central chamber housing a powerful queen with genius level intelligence and substantial psychic abilities, Star Hives can grow to rival dreadnoughts in size. They are fashioned by a caste of engineer insects who secrete building materials after harvesting matter from errant starships, asteroids, planets, and space stations. Star Hives are ravenous, always on the move, drifting through space and swarming across anything that could conceivably provide even the most modest resources for the Hive. The insects are implacable, merciless, and nigh unstoppable, not caring whether they have to slaughter sentient beings or not to get what they want.

So feared are Star Hives that even the greatest of foes have joined forces to wipe them out. One of the last Star Hives to reach anywhere near CCW space materialized along the Neutral Zone between the CCW and the Transgalactic Empire. A TGE Marauder and a CCW Wolfpack unloaded their full complement of firepower upon the hive, shattering it to pieces, and then calmly went on their separate ways.

Attempts to locate a point of origin for the Star Hives have proved fruitless. They are scattered far and wide across the Three Galaxies, and no one can predict when and where they might appear. Like locusts, they descend, devour, and move on. Some may fall, but others are always there to take their place. Travelers beware: if a Star Hive is discovered in a nearby system, consider relocating to another one.

— *Travelogues of a Journeyman, by Fraktyn Quint*

Alone again.

No small surprise there. Even given the trillions upon trillions of sentient beings existing in the Three Galaxies, there still existed a great deal of empty and uninhabited space. Yet for Caleb Vulcan, Knight of the Cosmic Forge, being alone was a relatively new experience. He arrived in the Three Galaxies alone, newly baptized by the Forge, and the wonder of it all was enough to keep away any hint of loneliness or homesickness. But as soon as the Wulfen Knight Lothar of Motherhome appeared and whisked him off to adventure, Caleb had been acquiring new friends and companions.

Doctor Abbot, the brilliant and warm-hearted wizard composed entirely of animate shadow. Kassiopaea Acherean, beautiful and deadly Atlantean Undead Slayer. Arwen Griffin, ingenuous alien martial artist. Siv Yurilak, the occasionally obnoxious pilot from Noro-Gar. Joriel, a biogenetically designed winged warrior from the S'hree Vek Confederacy. Ariel and

Vyking, fellow Cosmo-Knights. And Romana Vorishcenko ne Usckios, an agent for the Council of Time. Together, Caleb and his friends had tracked down and defeated Quajinn Huo, the being who killed Caleb's mentor Lothar, and recovered an artifact owned by the Council of Time.

They had done the impossible, traveling across vast gulfs of time and space to bring Huo to justice, thwarted Huo's bid for galactic dominance, and revenged themselves for the loss of Lothar. A celebration of some kind would certainly have been in order after all that, and yet when it was all over, everyone simply went their separate ways. All of them were natives of the Three Galaxies; they had homes to which they could return. But Caleb came from a tiny planet called Earth, a world he wasn't even sure existed in this dimension, and there was nothing for him to do but wander the Galaxies.

Strangely, there was no sorrow at the parting. Caleb rather got the sense that this sort of thing happened a lot to these kinds of people — those who saved the universe on a semi-regular basis — and they all assumed they would end up together again at some point, probably with the lives of billions at stake. Kassy had mentioned something in passing about Caleb returning to Alexandria with her, but she already had Joriel in tow, and Caleb knew he would be a third wheel. He felt some real regret at that; he couldn't deny being attracted to Kassy, but it appeared that the attraction was merely one way. Caleb's mood was softened, at least, by the presence of Romana, herself almost as beautiful and capable as Kassy, and much more enchanting. Caleb sensed *something* between himself and the Time Councilor, but in all the rush and rumble of battling Huo and saving the Three Galaxies, it had come to naught.

She had promised they would meet again. A bit enigmatic, but given her profession, he took her at her word. Perhaps next time there would be a chance for something... more. How *did* people date in the Three Galaxies? It wasn't as if he could take her out to the drive-in and the malt shop, after all. She was already light years away, dozens of star systems behind him.

Was she thinking about him?

Caleb mentally shook his head. Flying at superluminal speeds, he didn't strictly have a head to shake. He was pure cosmic energy, rocketing along faster than the speed of light. Caleb had no particular destination in mind. The Three Galaxies were vast, and he had only seen a fraction of it since his arrival. In fact, other than Phase World, he had largely been zipping about in and amongst the United Worlds of Warlock. Which was a little bit like only seeing New York City and the Deep South and ignoring the rest of America. So, when everyone else had parted ways, and no pressing business of his own needed attention, Caleb decided to explore a little bit.

He still had the matter of Thraxus to deal with, but he was beginning to rethink his approach. Thraxus was ageless and immortal, the richest man in the Three Galaxies and one of the most cruel. On a whim he had hired a group of terrorists to introduce famine to the most heavily populated planet in the Three Galaxies. Caleb and his friends had stopped the plan, at the cost

of Lothar's life. Yet after traveling back in time to capture Huo, Caleb had met and enlisted the enthusiastic aid of a younger Thraxus. That event had left Caleb feeling a little ambivalent towards the immortal. Thraxus possessed the potential for inestimable evil – but that also meant he possessed equal potential for good, and an apparent willingness to seesaw between both extremes. Thraxus' crimes could not go unpunished, but what would happen if Thraxus' help was needed in the future, and he was not there to give it?

Perhaps Caleb's travels would offer some kind of answer. Thraxus wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, and he certainly didn't seem to fear a lone Cosmo-Knight. Nor, in truth, was Caleb much of a threat by himself. But he might find an answer to his conundrum somewhere out there in the cosmos. Yet, would he recognize it when he saw it?

Caleb, you are needed. A feminine voice echoed within his mind, shattering his reverie. Even as Caleb recognized the voice as the Forge's, a series of spatial coordinates were downloaded into his brain. Almost against his will, he altered his trajectory towards the new destination. He existed to serve the Forge, and through it the common good of the Three Galaxies. He could no more refuse the Forge's summons than an ordinary man stop breathing.

Light years flashed past at increasing speed as he hurtled through the void.

* * *

Caleb materialized in space over a green and dusky world. He floated there for a little while, getting his bearings. Although starships needed a great deal of distance between themselves and any significant gravity well before entering or leaving supernormal speeds, Caleb's personal mass was slight enough that he appeared only a few thousand miles from the planet's atmosphere.

The planet itself looked unremarkable. No sign of pollution or extraterrestrial technology; even the headset he wore beneath his helmet picked up nothing but static. It could only be an undeveloped, pre-stellar world, then. Perhaps not even inhabited. Although, if it wasn't inhabited, what was the big deal?

Caleb started as he realized that the object he had taken for a small moon was actually moving slowly but surely towards the planet, and at a speed that suggested more than mere orbital decay. It didn't require cosmic awareness to see why the Forge had summoned him here.

He flew in closer to get a better look at the moon, or asteroid, or whatever it was. A humped ovoid in shape, the object looked almost organic, as if its rough and pockmarked surface had been sculpted by some crude hand. If he squinted the right way, the thing began to resemble nothing so much as a colossal beehive. As Caleb watched, the object ejected a cloud into space, a cloud that shifted and moved unnaturally. It focused on Caleb and began to fly towards him at an accelerated rate.

As it drew closer, the Knight began to make out the individual components of the cloud. They looked like sleek silver projectiles, with big domed protrusions on the front, and strange ridges running all along their length. Caleb flexed his right hand and opened it. A bar of red energy formed there, coalescing into

the shape of a massive jet and crimson maul. It was his signature weapon, shaped in the image of the stylized hammer decorating the breastplate of his armor.

The missiles grew in size, and Caleb finally realized the things were organic. Bugs. *Big* bugs. The domes were blue and black insect eyes, the strange ridges their multiple limbs folded up tightly against their armored bodies. It looked like they had wings as well, pinned flat against their backs as they hurtled through space. Each of the bugs was twice the size of a full grown adult man, too large to be biologically feasible, at least on Earth. Bugs on Earth couldn't exist unprotected in a vacuum either, he reminded himself.

While the things flew towards him, their hive had drifted closer to the planet. In a few minutes it would penetrate the atmosphere. And then what would happen? Somehow Caleb didn't expect it would be anything good.



The cloud of insects were practically upon him now. They were delicately built, somewhat like wasps back home, but Caleb had no doubt they were tougher than steel. He counted at least fifty of the wasps, and hoped he could handle them all by himself. Even as the thought passed through his mind, he saw fifty pairs of eyes begin to glow, and then the space between Caleb and the wasps was filled with light.

Caleb had expected as much. He had noted no personal weaponry, and the wasps were too small to hide missile launchers. That meant some kind of energy projection. Fifty bolts of superheated plasma slammed into him from all sides and reflected harmlessly off his armor. Caleb allowed himself a grin beneath his centurion's helm. He could fly naked through the

heart of a star, shrug off a direct hit from a starship's main gun, or go to sleep in a lava pool. He didn't breathe, eat, drink, sleep, or suffer from heatstroke.

Then a dozen of the things slammed into him, and he felt their claws scrape against his armor. The grin faltered. He was pretty tough, yeah, but hardly invulnerable. And having a bug bigger than a linebacker snap its mandibles inches from his face gave him a definite case of the heebie-jeebies. He could *feel* the scrapes in his armor widen as the wasps' claws dug into him. The armor was a part of him, a badge of office as well as an extension of his being. These wasps could sting.

So can I, Caleb thought. The visor in his helm glowed an angry red. A wide arc of energy erupted from the visor, blasting the two nearest wasps to shreds. Out here in the emptiness of space, he could do a lot of things he couldn't do in an atmosphere. Flying faster than light was one of them; generating enough energy to cut through a starship's shields was another. He didn't wait to see the effects of his beam, instead swinging his hammer with all his Forge-born strength. He felt a satisfying crunch travel up his arms as hammer met exoskeleton. Red light flashed as he loosed his beams again.

The wasps swarmed around him, trying to overbear him, take him down through sheer numbers. It was an admirable strategy. It was their only edge, and they knew how to use it. They tried to wrap around his legs, to pin his arms against his chest and keep that hammer out of play, to blind him with their claws and wings, to slash him to ribbons with their claws and mandibles.

But Caleb Vulcan was a Knight of the Forge, and the Forge had built its servants well. While the wasps' energy blasts were useless against him, they were all too vulnerable to his own firepower. His eyebeams sliced through a half-dozen wasps at a time, blasting them to pieces. Despite their size, they couldn't match his strength. He broke through their holds and cracked open their exoskeletons with fists and knees and elbows and his heavy hammer. Their size hindered their ability to truly swarm him, too. The wasps might have had little trouble making their locust-play on even a small starship, but at half their size, Caleb was simply too small and slippery for the tactic.

In a matter of minutes, the Knight had broken their attack. The shattered bodies of dozens of wasps floated in space around him, while a few demoralized wings beat a hasty retreat back to the safety of the hive. Caleb was nicked and scraped here and there, and bug juice stained his armor. He had extended a bit of his personal energy to fuel his higher powered energy blasts, but other than that he was barely winded. The rents in his armor were already beginning to seal, and the wasps hadn't penetrated past his cosmic epidermis.

Still, the hive had managed to penetrate the planet's atmosphere. A yellow and orange glow surrounded it as it burned through the upper layer, but it showed no signs of slowing or stopping. The question was, would it stop of its own accord, or would it plow into the planet's surface like the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs? Caleb gritted his teeth. He hoped it wouldn't be the latter; there wasn't much he could do about something like that.

Caleb hefted his hammer and flew at top speed towards the hive. Maybe the pilot or captain or queen or whatever would listen to reason.

Right.

* * *

For the sixth day in a row, Vodal Kee sat in a CCW debriefing chamber. This was to be expected. Barely two weeks before, he had been stationed as a scientist on one of the Transgalactic Empire's weapon research planets. His Kreeghor masters had put him to work trying to reverse engineer T'zee nanotechnology, while hundreds of other brilliant minds gathered from all over the empire labored over similar projects whose end results could only be the deaths of thousands, if not millions or billions. It was not a situation that Vodal Kee found tenable, so he had engineered his own escape, hiring a Galactic Tracer by the name of Sammadar Orak to whisk him off planet and into the hopefully friendly and loving arms of the TGE's greatest enemy: the Consortium of Civilized Worlds.

The CCW, embodied by a pair of sentients named Yul Dirrel and Ruthven Abramowitz, Noro and Human respectably. The Noro was almost certainly psionically scanning Kee constantly, and Officer Abramowitz asked pointed question after pointed question. Both Kee and Orak were scanned head to toe – Orak very grudgingly – and all of Kee's personal data terminals were confiscated and every scrap of information downloaded and pored over by CCW techs and scientists. Kee had left the TGE with a considerable amount of plundered cash and stolen plans from his fellow research scientists. Most of the material proved to be as bogus as Kee's own nanotech project.

But one of those projects proved to be of extreme interest. The Shadow Star Project. Kee didn't know much about it himself, it was just one of a random number of files he had pilfered, but the name had made Abramowitz' eyes light up and Dirrel's hair spikes stand up on end. They were playing it cagey, but from what Kee could tell, some kind of independent intelligence had confirmed the existence of the Shadow Star Project.

Which could only mean one thing, in Kee's considered opinion: the project had been greenlighted, the machine had been built, and it was probably past the first stage of trials. That was Kee's clinical side. If he thought about it more than that, he felt sick to his stomach. The Shadow Star had likely already killed.

Kee's morbid thoughts were interrupted as the door scissored open. Dirrel and Abramowitz entered, both neatly dressed in their white and gray suits. Outside, Kee caught a glimpse of Gregg, the security officer who had escorted him from his quarters to the debriefing room, and also provided Kee with a freshly brewed pot of stim and a pastry. Whatever else might happen, the CCW had at least proved to be vastly different from the TGE.

Kee smiled at the CCW officers and extended his left hand to shake Abramowitz' hand in greeting. He paused with his mechanical arm half-extended. Two more people entered the room behind the officers, one of them recognizable, the other a stranger. Sammadar Orak was an intergalactic mercenary, a bounty hunter, and Kee's savior. Orak wore a suit of power armor; in fact, Kee had yet to see him outside it. The armor looked vaguely insect-like, smooth-limbed with slightly rounded edges. Orak had painted it in a dazzling array of day-glo colors, though here and there nicks and scrapes in the armor's surface showed the bright silvery sheen of the metal's original color. Kee still didn't know the manufacturer of the armor, nor could he guess at its specs, but he had seen Orak take down an Invincible

Guardman all by himself, and that took considerable power and skill.

The man at Orak's side was long-limbed and powerfully built for a human. His black hair was shaggy at the top, and he wore a neatly trimmed beard. A floral print shirt, a pair of canvas shorts, and sandals were his only costume. Kee might have dismissed the stranger as some kind of galactic drifter, if not for his own circumstances. And the cold blue eyes examining Kee dispassionately made his hearts thunder suddenly in his chest.

"What... uh... what is going on?" Kee heard himself say.

"Doctor Vodál," Dirrel said, "I'd like to introduce Sol Vyking. Vyking, Doctor Vodál Kee."

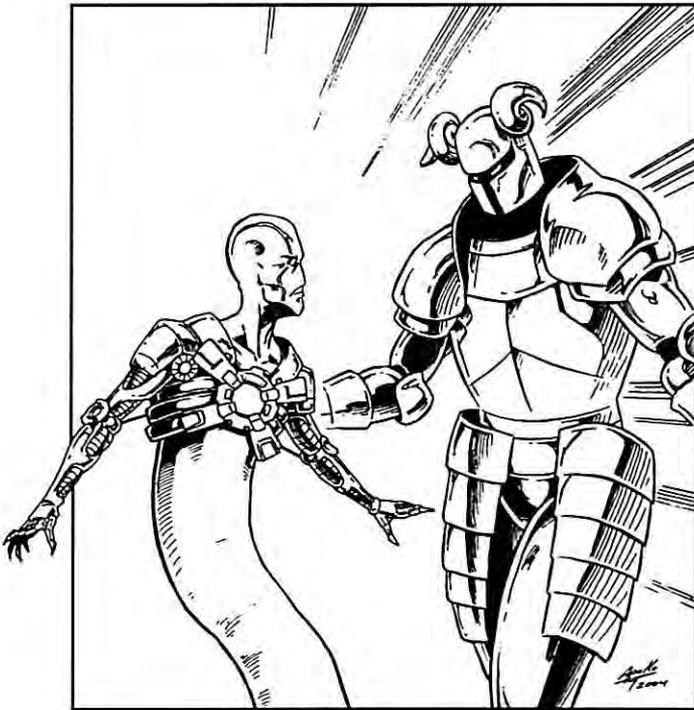
"A pleasure to finally meet you, Doctor," Vyking said.

"I'm afraid you have the advantage over me, Mr. Vyking."

White teeth flashed in the black beard, and then a blue flash filled the room. Kee blinked rapidly, his eyes slow to adjust after the burst of light. When they refocused, he felt his blood run cold.

A giant in metallic blue plate armor had replaced Vyking in the room. The horned helm inclined slightly, and eyeholes as deep and black as the void of space regarded Kee coldly.

"By the Unseeing Eye and all Its Minions," Kee swore under his breath. "A Cosmo-Knight. Did I mention that I already surrendered?"



Vyking chuckled. His voice had acquired a metallic edge that echoed from his helmet. "I'm not here for you, Doctor Vodál. Not exactly. I'm here about the Shadow Star Project. It needs to be stopped, and you're the closest thing to an expert that we have."

Kee stared at him for a long moment, then looked at the impassive faces of Dirrel and Abramowitz. "Oh no. No, no, no, no, no. Nine Hells and Seven Devils, no. I'm a scientist! Not some kind of... of... adventurer! I barely survived Thelagg Vohann! Ask Orak! He was there!"

"Doctor, please calm yourself." Dirrel's voice was low and even. "There is no need for hysterics." Almost against his will, Kee felt himself grow more relaxed. He grimaced, gripped his cup of stim with both his waldoes, and forced the anger back. None of the Noro's mind tricks were going to sidetrack him.

"I understand your reluctance, Doctor Vodál," Vyking said. "No one will force you to do anything you don't wish to do. But we need your help. You've been on the inside, Doctor. You have a familiarity with both Kreeghor technology and experimental weapon systems that will prove invaluable to this endeavor. You've also had more time to examine the project plans than any of our people. As I said, you're practically an expert. Don't sell yourself short, either. According to Orak, during your escape from Thelagg Vohann you performed with aplomb, courage, and ingenuity.

"If it makes you feel any safer, we've taken the liberty of contracting Sammadar Orak to serve as your bodyguard in the field."

Kee looked at the enigmatic bounty hunter. The insectoid head nodded once. "I haven't said 'yes' yet," Kee said. "In fact, I think I've already said 'no' several grunning times."

"I know. But Doctor, you more than anyone else know the stakes here. Billions of lives may hang in the balance. The Shadow Star is operational. Already, using the data you have provided, we have been able to recognize the Shadow Star's energy signature in a number of anomalous readings we've recorded from TGE space in the last six months."

Kee's mouth dropped open. "It... it... really?"

Abramowitz nodded. "Yes, Kee. We have."

"Qrun," Kee said. "Qrun and shivok and the Doom of the Eye and every other curse word I can think of, and every one I can't. I'll help you, Sol Vyking. But I have to say, you'll need more than a noncombatant and the toughest bounty hunter in the Three Galaxies to deal with the Shadow Star."

Vyking's horns dipped. "I can only agree. I'm leaving immediately to procure some allies."

* * *

Clouds turned to mist as Caleb's body tore through the planet's atmosphere. The gap between himself and the hive closed quickly. It was as large as a mountain, ridged and humped like a beehive, venting steam and gases from dozens of openings as it dropped closer to the planet's surface. Caleb dropped in along the hive's rocky surface, eyes searching for an airlock of some kind.

Some of the larger humps of rock began to move. With a start, Caleb realized they were more bugs. These ones were as big as Volkswagons, and looked like some kind of strange centauroid creatures. Claws and mandibles snapped as they watched Caleb buzz past them. They didn't appear to have any ranged attack, at least.

A sizzling bolt of nearly invisible energy flew past Caleb's head, nearly connecting with the crest on his helm. *Okay, then. So much for that theory.*

Caleb responded in kind, strafing the beetle creatures with his eyebeams. One of them was dislodged from its perch and tum-

bled off the side of the hive, plummeting with five pairs of limbs flailing wildly. More energy bolts flashed through the air in Caleb's direction. One of them hit, piercing his armor under his arm, burning with an intensity that elicited a startled and unself-conscious yelp from the Knight. He spun out of control for a moment, allowing another quartet of energy blasts to catch him. Those hurt as well.

Which should be impossible. Unless... that wasn't normal energy. Were the bugs using magic? More blasts sizzled past him, thankfully missing the mark, but alerting Caleb to the danger. *Get your head back in the game.* He unleashed a few quick blasts of his own, and then ramped himself up to top speed and circled the hive. The beetles tried to follow, but though their claws gave them an excellent grip on the hive's surface and their multiple limbs allowed them to move quickly, they couldn't match a Cosmo-Knight going all out. The hive became a big black blur beneath Caleb.

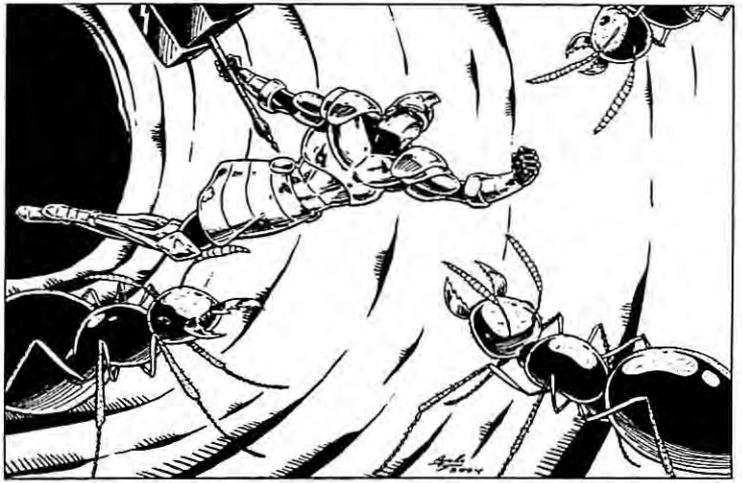
A cloud of wasps suddenly exploded all around him, and then they were behind him as Caleb's speed carried him beyond the attack. He lurched to a halt and doubled back, executing a maneuver that would have crushed a normal man flat. Even so, Caleb's muscles screamed and bones groaned as the g-forces squeezed hard. The wasps, wings extended, closed in around him for a brief second. Then he was past them again, darting through them like a pixel of red light. He saw the opening they had come from and blasted through it. He caromed off a cave wall, chipping the shoulder pad on his armor and scraping a long furrow in the stone. Or metal. Or whatever it was.

The corridor was roughly shaped, as though it had been dug or chewed out of the stone matrix. Here and there, clusters of some glassy phosphorescent substance lit the tunnel. More wasps waited for Caleb inside, but he blew through them, eliciting one satisfying crunch as his hammer took one of the wasps in the skull.

The tunnel widened. Some of the beetle things waited for him, claws extended and waiting to grab. Caleb couldn't suppress a grin as he slid through their ambush like a greased eel, bending and twisting his body in unnatural patterns to evade the attack. Cosmic awareness wedded with preternatural speed made Caleb difficult to hit when he didn't want to be. At least, when he could see it coming. Invisible energy bolts whizzed past him. Some connected, burning with white hot fire but leaving no mark. Caleb gritted his teeth and kept moving.

He flew down tunnel after tunnel, taking turns at random in an attempt to lose pursuit, hoping he wouldn't slam into a dead end. The interior hive was a maze in any case, seemingly designed without rhyme or reason. Nothing stood out as different, either. Each corridor looked the same as the last, some a little narrower or wider than others, but other than that, lacking any variation. Aside from the beetle centaurs and the space wasps, Caleb started to see giant ants as well. They undulated across floor, wall, or ceilings with equal ease, like a carapaced, moving carpet. If Caleb got too close, the ants would snap at him with oversized and vicious looking mandibles, but none of them reacted quickly enough to actually connect.

Concern was growing to frustration. For all Caleb knew, the hive had already landed and begun to despoil the planet, disgorging any of its seemingly limitless number of warrior bugs to slaughter untold innocents. He could only hope that he was



causing enough concern or discomfort to keep them focussed on him, but he had no idea if it was working. Nor was he getting any closer to any kind of command or control center. Caleb had no idea how the hive was being piloted. He had largely assumed that there would be a bridge of some kind, some leader to negotiate a surrender with, or threaten into coercion. Instead, all he saw was corridor after corridor, jammed tight with threatening bugs.

BOOM!

An explosion suddenly rocked the entire hive, dislodging chunks of stone and ants alike. Caleb bounced hard off a wall before righting himself. Energy bolts flashed towards him, and he just barley dodged out of the way. The beetles recovered more quickly than he did, apparently.

BOOM!

Playing a hunch, Caleb tongued the controls to the headset he wore under his helmet. "Hello? Is there anyone out there? Anyone reading me?"

Instead of the static that should have been there, a sharp female voice answered him. "This is the CAF *Hidalgo II*. Identify yourself."

BOOM!

Caleb laughed. "Caleb Vulcan, Cosmo-Knight. Is that you folks blasting the exterior of this hive?"

The female voice paused. "Affirmative. Are you inside the Star Hive, Sir Vulcan?"

"It's Caleb, and that's a big, fat yes. Boy am I glad to hear you guys. I'm looking for the head bug around here. Any idea where I might find it?"

A familiar voice cut into the discussion. "Caleb, it's Vyking. We were in the area looking for you when the Star Hive appeared on our scopes."

"Looking for me? Why?"

"It can wait. What you're looking for is the Hive Queen, but they can't be reasoned with and their psionic powers are off the scale. On your own you're no match for it. Get out of there and let us blow this thing to smithereens."

BOOM!

"Um, yeah," Caleb said, "about that. I'm sort of lost."

A very loud sigh came from the headset's speakers. "Do your best. In the meantime, we'll keep making more escape routes for you."

BOOM!

"Sounds like a plan, *amigo*." Caleb tongued his headset off and rounded a corner. He nearly slammed into the hulking bulk of a beetle perched in the middle of the tunnel, but caught himself just in time. As it was, the thing unleashed a bolt of light that caught him in the chest.

Caleb spun the hammer in his hand and threw it. The beetle's exoskeleton crunched and splintered into fragments. It flipped backwards, squealing and spraying bug juice all over the place. Caleb called the hammer back to his hand and flew on, now looking for a way out. The *Hidalgo II* continued to lay a barrage of fire upon the hive. Tunnels cracked, the phosphorescent crystals exploded, and fragments of stone and bugs spilled everywhere. A boulder smashed into Caleb's back, knocking him to the floor and denting his armor. Caleb picked himself up and felt a hard claw close around his bicep. He looked up into the flat, emotionless eyes of one of the beetles.

"Aw, crap," Caleb managed to get out before a pair of claws tore across his helmet, tearing the metal into scrap and exposing the flesh beneath. He managed to get his legs beneath him and sprang up, lashing out with both fists. The beetle's head popped disgustingly. Caleb grimaced and spat bug juice out of his mouth.

Sadly enough, he thought, *this is hardly my most disgusting adventure*.

He called the hammer back to his hands and looked around. Another attack shook the hive. Dust and pebbles bounced off Caleb's armor. The tunnel he was in didn't look any different than any of the others he had so far seen. No, that wasn't true — the light was different. It wasn't phosphor. It was daylight spilling down the corridor from up ahead. Grinning like an idiot, Caleb flew down the hall and found a rent torn in the fabric of the wall, glowing with sunlight. He aimed himself towards freedom and flew at top speed.

Caleb burst out into the afternoon air and took a deep breath. Behind him the hive was a broken mass, smoking and shattered, dropping like a stone to the planet's surface. Swarms of wasps fluttered about the ruin and buzzed through the surrounding air, unleashing ineffectual blasts of energy against the Consortium Armed Forces Warshield-Class cruiser that was itself loosing an endless barrage of fire against the hive. Vyking was in the air as

well, a blue hornet that hunted wasps, blasting them out of the sky with azure light and slashing at them with his longsword.

Caleb entered the fray. He fought his way to Vyking's side. "Nice to see you," Vyking said, using that silent communication Cosmo-Knights could only use amongst themselves.

"Isn't that my line?" Caleb answered. "I was pretty far out of my depth in there. You guys are a sight for sore eyes to be sure."

Vyking laughed and shot a wasp down with a blue bolt. "You're just lucky you stumbled across a small hive. Much bigger, and they would have been doing the crushing."

"Small one? *That's* a small one?"

Vyking laughed again.

* * *

Later, when the Star Hive was a mass of rubble strewn across the planet Langerhans' landscape, and the *Hidalgo II* had sent a few dozen cruise missiles into the rubble "just to be sure," Caleb and Vyking floated in the air and watched the show.

"How long were you looking for me?" Caleb asked the other Knight.

"Not long. We were only on your trail for a few hours. Luck, or the Forge, is looking out for both of us. Hopefully, Ariel will be just as easy to find."

Caleb clenched his teeth. "This is all starting to sound very serious. What kind of threat requires not one, not two, but three Cosmo-Knights to intervene? Another Dominator?"

"Worse."

"Worse," Caleb echoed. "Than a Dominator? Why do I feel like someone stepped on my grave?"

"What grave? You have the strangest expressions, Caleb." Vyking chuckled. "But the situation is indeed serious. The TGE has devised a weapon powerful enough to snuff out stars, Caleb. We are talking nothing less than the potential for genocide on a galactic scale."

Caleb looked at Vyking, and for once, couldn't think of anything to say.

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