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RIFTS®

Your Guide to the Megaverse®



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Rifts® – Town of Karimyo in the Pecos Empire™

Heroes Unlimited™ – Ancient Weapon Master™

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Rifts® – Short Story

Coming Attractions, News, & More

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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 74

Your Guide to the Palladium Megaverse®!

PDF Edition – January 2018

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The Rifter® #74 is part of an RPG sourcebook series published by Palladium Books Inc., 39074 Webb Court, Westland, MI 48185. Printed in the USA by McNaughton & Gunn of Saline, Michigan.

Palladium Books® Presents:

THE RIFTER® #74

BRANDT - 97

Sourcebook and Guide to the Palladium Megaverse®

Coordinator & Editor in Chief: **Wayne Smith**

Editor: **Alex Marciniszyn**

Contributing Writers:

Brett Caron
Lance Colley
Robert Daley Jr.
S.E. Gibbons
Christopher Kluge
Julius Rosenstein
Kevin Siembieda
Todd Spencley
Charles Walton II

Proofreader: **Julius Rosenstein**

Cover Illustration: **Apollo Okamura**

Interior Artists:

Mark Dudley
Michael Leonard
Michael Mumah
Benjamin Rodriguez
Kevin Siembieda
Charles Walton II

Cover Logo Design: **Steve Edwards**

Credits Page Logo: **Niklas Brandt**

Typesetting & Layout: **Wayne Smith**

Art Direction: **Kevin Siembieda**

Based on the RPG rules, characters,
concepts and Megaverse® created by **Kevin Siembieda**.

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

– Kevin Siembieda, 2016

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Page 6 – From the Desk of Kevin Siembieda

Publisher Kevin Siembieda talks about his getting hit by a car and dealing with recovery after surgery for a broken humerus bone. He is on the mend and looking forward to knocking out the many books planned for this year and beyond.

Page 7 – Palladium News

The boss man announces **Robotech® The Masters Saga™ Sourcebook** being reprinted in Palladium's usual 8½ x 11 format (no more manga edition), **Rifts® CS Heroes of Humanity Arsenal™** being added to the schedule as a companion to **Rifts® Heroes of Humanity™** (available now), four titles back in print, the progress on half a dozen books in the pipeline, the success of the **Rifts® Savage Worlds Kickstarter**, and the unexpected passing of beloved friend and freelancer, *Randi Cartier*. By the way, *Anime North* was fun, as always. (Hey Todd, Greg, Braden, Apollo, Brett, Mike, Kent and everyone, it was good to see you.) *Gen Con* (August) and *Grand Con* (September) are our next two convention appearances.

Page 9 – Coming Attractions

Rifts® Heroes of Humanity™ has shipped, is pretty awesome, and is waiting for you to order. We could not squeeze all our ideas for CS weapons and gear into HoH, so we have created **Rifts® CS Heroes of Humanity Arsenal** as a companion title (August release!). **Robotech® The Masters Saga™ Sourcebook** goes full-size format, several game titles are back in print, and we are working away on **Rifts® Secrets of the Atlanteans** and several new titles. Get all the details in the News and Coming Attractions section of this issue.

Page 16 – The Town of Moorcroft, Wyoming – Official source material for Rifts®

This is *Julius Rosenstein's* companion piece to the “official” source material about the Nexus Born and Hidden Nexus points and ley lines in **The Rifter® #73**. The Town of Moorcroft is located on a hidden ley line and has a good number of Nexus Born practitioners of magic. It is a peaceful town nestled in the middle of the wilderness in the New West where hostile Simvan Monster Riders, Native American tribes and other forces claim the land and war with each other. That makes Moorcroft something of an oasis in a dangerous wilderness. Thankfully, it has the Nexus Born and some unusual characters to keep it safe.

Moorcroft is described and outlined, with notable people and places described. *Official source material.*

Page 16 – Pre-Cataclysm Moorcroft

Page 16 – Post-Cataclysm Moorcroft

Page 19 – Foreign Relations

Page 19 – Cyber-Knights

Page 19 – Psi-Stalkers

Page 20 – Simvan Monster Riders

Page 20 – Economy

Page 20 – Businesses & Places of Interest

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Page 22 – Moorcroft Oil and Petroleum Store

Page 22 – Holidays

Page 23 – Town Government and Law and Order

Page 24 – Notable People of Moorcroft

Page 26 – Brokely, Cyber-Squire

Page 28 – Sir Antranek, Cyber-Knight

Artwork by *Mark Dudley* and *Mike Mumah*.

Page 30 – Ancient Weapons Master: Specialist™ – Optional source material for Heroes Unlimited™

Robert Daley Jr. presents optional rules and suggestions for making the *Ancient Weapons Master* in **HU2: Powers Unlimited® 2** a more focused, dedicated and deadly combatant. *Julius Rosenstein* gives this article two thumbs up and says it really makes the *Ancient Weapons Master* a fun and formidable character.

Page 32 – Melee Techniques

Page 34 – Ranged Techniques

Art by *Mark Dudley*.

Page 36 – Wilderness Community – Karimyo™ – Optional source material for Rifts®

Brett Caron describes a small community in the Pecos Empire not far from Sabre Lasar territory. Another nice pit stop for adventurers. Read and enjoy.

Page 38 – People of Note

Art by *Benjamin Rodriguez*.

Page 40 – I am Legion, Part Three – Official adventure & source material for Splicers®

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

Page 40 – Change of Plans

Page 42 – Map

Page 47 – A Horrific Reunion

Page 48 – New Bio-Enhancements

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Page 69 – Stalker Bio-Weapon Systems
Page 73 – New NPCs, Notes & Quick Stats
Artwork by <i>Charles Walton II</i> .

Page 75 – Acceptance – A story for Rifts®

S.E. Gibbons presents a Rifts® story about a hardworking “everyman” living in the ‘Burbs who dreams of becoming a Coalition citizen. It’s all he strives for, but fate seems to have other plans for him when his life takes an unexpected detour.

Artwork by “Madman” *Michael Leonard*.

The Theme for Issue 74

The theme of **The Rifter® #74** is exotic places, the secrets they hold and the adventure they can bring. Game Masters, explore the possibilities and bring fun and adventure to your players. Um, players, watch out. Game on.

The Rifter® Needs You

We need new writers and artists to fill the next few decades of **The Rifter®**. You do not need to be a professional writer to contribute to **The Rifter®**. This publication is like a “fanzine,” written by fans for fans. A forum in which gamers just like *you* can submit articles, G.M. advice, player tips, house rules, adventures, new magic, new psionics, new super abilities, monsters, villains, high-tech weapons, vehicles, power armor, short works of fiction and more. So think about writing up something short (even something as small as 4-6 pages). Newcomers and regular contributors are always welcome.

The Rifter® needs new material, especially when it comes to adventures and source material, for *all* of our game lines, particularly *Rifts®*, *Chaos Earth®*, *Palladium Fantasy RPG®*, *Heroes Unlimited™*, *Ninjas and Superspies™*, *Beyond the Supernatural™*, *Dead Reign®*, *Splicers®* and *Nightbane®*.

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

The Cover

The cover is by **Apollo Okamura** and depicts a deadly encounter between a Native American warrior and a Simvan Monster Rider in league with a Devil Unicorn. This conflict takes place in the Wyoming Big Horn Mountains not far from Moorcroft.

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

The Rifter® #75

The Rifter® #75, Summer issue offers more “official” and unofficial new source material for Rifts® and other Palladium RPG settings.

- **Rifts® – “official” source material.**
- **Rifts® the Kingdom of Sherwood Park, Canada.**
- **Splicers® – I am Legion, Part 4, “official” source material.**
- **Optional source material for 2-4 other settings.**
- **More gaming advice.**
- **News, coming attractions, product descriptions and more.**
- **96 pages – \$13.95 retail – Cat. No. 175. Summer issue.**

**One game system, infinite possibilities
limited only by your imagination™**

Celebrating 35 years of adventure in the Megaverse®

From the Desk of Kevin Siembieda

This Spring started with a bang. Actually, more like the proverbial “bolt out of the blue” when I was struck by a car on Mother’s Day. It was a beautiful Spring morning. I had come back from taking Kathy to breakfast and I thought I would go for a walk before the temperature got too hot. I walk 30 minutes every day.

I was enjoying the morning and thinking what an amazing day it was when ... WHAM! I was hit by a car.

I was a pedestrian on the sidewalk. The driver was distracted by his children in the backseat when he backed out of his driveway. I was struck in my left thigh and knocked down hard to the concrete on my right side. The impact bruised my leg and broke the humerus bone – the second thickest bone in the body. The break was between the elbow and shoulder of my right arm and it broke clear through.

Yes, I’m right-handed.

Yes, it hurt like nothing I had ever experienced.

Yes, it was scary to see my arm unresponsive and bending in ways that should be impossible!



Before

After

Long story short, my upper right arm is now held together by a strip of metal and eight screws. The incident was scary, but could have been deadly. I’m lucky the driver stopped or I might be crippled or dead. Lucky I did not hit my head or damage my spine. Whew. Still, it was a painful ordeal I would not wish on anyone, so be on guard. And, as said by the late, Muhammad Ali, and I paraphrase, “Live every day as if it could be your last, because one day, you’ll be right.”

I am happy to report that I am on the mend and, by my own estimation, I seem to be doing very well. My arm is still stiff and sore, pain is manageable, and physical therapy has increased my mobility. I expect to have full mobility of my limb in the weeks ahead, and although I’m told my arm may never be quite 100%, I’m optimistic. I’m already back at the office and working away on several of the new books described in these pages.

An incident like this makes you think and appreciate life, your loved ones and everything you have. I have lived an amazing

life and met an incredible number of people who have touched my life and vice versa. I have a lot more games, characters and stories from across the Megaverse to tell, so you can count on seeing a heck of a lot more coming from Palladium in the months and years ahead. At the same time, I will be making time to share with the people I love, playing more games and living every day like it’s my last, because, darn it, one day it will be.

Moving Forward

My getting hit by a car and subsequent recovery, doctor follow-ups, tests, physical therapy and paperwork have knocked us behind deadline, and took me out of my writing groove. I was hot as Hades writing before the accident. Since then, I’ve been distracted and struggling to get back into writing and the creative mode. I think that’s starting to change as I get good reports from my doctors and ideas are starting to boil again. I can feel the creative juices beginning to flow. There are so many exciting new books in the pipeline that I long to finish writing.

That means my immediate goal is to focus on getting the many books titles in the pipeline finished and into your hands while also getting back to continuing work on bigger projects to get them just right (**Robotech® RPG Tactics™** included).

Rifts® and **Robotech®** are two of our main focuses. And you are going to start seeing exactly what I meant when last issue I said, *2016: Rifts® on Steroids*. That starts with the bold moves and storylines of **Rifts® CS Heroes of Humanity™** which people are loving. It is going to be quickly followed by **Heroes of Humanity Arsenal**, **Secrets of the Atlanteans™**, **The Disavowed™**, **Rifts® Haunted Tech™**, and the upcoming release of **Rifts® for Savage Worlds**. All of which are in various stages of production.

The **Rifts® for Savage Worlds Kickstarter** that took place over April and the beginning of May wowed people as it approached the half a million dollar mark! We’ll talk a great deal more about **Pinnacle’s Savage Rifts®** in the next issue of **The Rifter®**. Our thanks for the support and excitement many of you showed this project. You won’t be disappointed.

As I also mentioned in the last issue of **The Rifter®**, we’ve been laying the groundwork for Palladium’s immediate and long-term future. If all goes well with those and developing plans, I hope Palladium Books will be making some moves and announcements that should wow and excite people. We have been working on a number of ventures behind the scenes for the last few years that are reaching fruition. One code-named “Project Falcon” by Matthew Clements has been on a slow boil for the last five years. It is a massive undertaking and pet project we all want to get right. There are also a few projects that have gone too slowly like **Robotech® RPG Tactics™** that we intend to push hard on and make better than ever.

– Kevin Siembieda, June, 2016

Palladium News

By Kevin Siembieda, the guy who should know

Robotech® The Masters Saga™ – now available in 8½ x 11 format

Robotech® The Masters Saga™ Sourcebook is now available in the larger, 8½ x 11 inch format the same as all of our RPG books. This is especially useful due to all the illustrations depicting a wide variety of Army of the Southern Cross soldiers, armor, Battloids, power armor, weapons, and equipment. See Coming Attractions for complete details.

Titles Back in Print

Several titles that had been temporarily out of print are back in stock. They include the following:

Wolfen Empire™ for Palladium Fantasy®
Villains Unlimited™ for Heroes Unlimited™
Century Station™ for Heroes Unlimited™
After the Bomb® RPG – stand-alone RPG and great for Heroes Unlimited™

See Coming Attractions for complete descriptions.

Rifts® Secrets of the Coalition States™:

Heroes of Humanity™ Sourcebook – Available now

Rifts® CS Heroes of Humanity™ arrived at the Palladium warehouse on June 16 and is available for purchase right now! The reaction from people who have already read it is “wow.” Gamers are enjoying the spotlight on the Coalition Army and dealing with the demonic invasion from Hell. An event (see **Rifts® Megaverse® in Flames**) that could change Rifts Earth forever.

Rifts® CS Heroes of Humanity™ is a game changer, fun, different and thought provoking. There are new combinations of player characters, unlikely alliances, and conflicts that bring together the Coalition Army, Lemurians, Minions of Splugorth, D-Bees, mages and others against a greater common enemy. It is sweeping and epic. **Rifts® Heroes of Humanity™** also presents ways to refresh and upgrade existing men-at-arms characters, and there is renewed focus and info on *Coalition Juicers*, *Combat Cyborgs*, and *CS Psychics*.

Rifts® CS Heroes of Humanity™ shakes up the status quo and breathes new life into any **Rifts®** campaign set in North America. A free preview of **Rifts® CS Heroes of Humanity™** is available at DriveThruRPG.com.

Spread the word, this is a 160 page sourcebook every Rifts fan is going to want.

Rifts® Secrets of the Coalition States:

NEW! Heroes of Humanity™ Arsenal

We had so many ideas for **Heroes of Humanity™** that I could not squeeze them all into it, even with the increased page count. The solution is a companion sourcebook we are calling **CS He-**

roes of Humanity™ Arsenal. The name pretty much says it all. New Coalition SAMAS, power armor, robots, combat vehicles, weapons, gear and information. I am probably working on this title as you read this. **CS HoH Arsenal** should ship in August. See Coming Attractions for details.

Rifts® Secrets of the Atlanteans™

I have been bouncing back and forth between **Heroes of Humanity™ Arsenal** and Carl Gleba's **Secrets of the Atlanteans™**. Some of the artwork for Atlanteans has already been assigned and John Zeleznik is working on the cover. This is going to be another far-reaching Dimension Book with applications for characters and adventures on *Rifts Earth*, *Phase World®* and across *the Megaverse®*. Looking like an August or September Release. See Coming Attractions for details.

Rifts® The Disavowed™

Another work in progress, I continue to jot down notes and ideas for this book as they come. This is a stand-alone book related by theme, time-line and interlocking events to **Heroes of Humanity™**, but presents its own unique and shocking avenues of adventure. I'm working at weaving a sprawling tapestry of events and forces that will surprise and engage Rifts® players on many levels. **Rifts® Secrets of the Atlanteans** and **CS Heroes of Humanity™ Arsenal** along with **CS Heroes of Humanity™**, **The Disavowed™** and **Rifts® Haunted Tech™** are all pieces of a much larger tapestry of events that can be played as stand-alone adventures or something much bigger. See Coming Attractions for details on all these titles.

Rifts® Sovietski™ coming in the Fall

Rifts® Sovietski™ is in the pipeline. The manuscript has been turned in by co-author Brandon Aten and the cover has been assigned to *John Zeleznik*. Interior artwork to be assigned soon. A Fall release.

Savage Rifts® Kickstarter a smash hit

For those of you who may not have heard about this yet, Palladium has licensed **Rifts®** for adaptation to Pinnacle Entertainment's popular **Savage Worlds** RPG game system. **The Savage Rifts® Kickstarter** ended in May with impressive results, \$438,076 in backer pledges! The initial 3-4 game books should ship by the end of 2016. An exact release date is not yet available.

Pinnacle's Rifts® Savage Worlds titles adapt Palladium's famous **Rifts®** setting, characters, D-Bees, magic and all the rest to the *Savage Worlds* rules. These rules are quite different than Palladium's own, but Rifts® fans may want these full color, well written **Rifts® Savage Worlds** titles just to read and own, or to incorporate their many ideas, random tables and adventures into their current **Rifts®** games.

Likewise, **Savage Worlds** players can use learn more about *Rifts Earth* and its many people, places and conflicting forces by purchasing any of Palladium's **Rifts® World Books** or sourcebooks – all available in print, and many available as PDFs from DriveThruRPG.com. Blend Palladium's *Rifts® source material with Savage Worlds®*, and vice versa to experience the wonders of the **Rifts® Megaverse®**. There is nothing quite like it.

Garden of the Gods™

For Palladium Fantasy RPG®

This is a personal project of mine, and I am anxious to get back to writing this book, but I have other commitments I need to finish first. By the way, The Garden is just one of *three* Fantasy titles in the works. See Coming Attractions for details about **Garden of the Gods™**.

More zombies in Hell Followed™

A sourcebook for Dead Reign®

The book is written and artist Nick Bradshaw is working away on the artwork. As he reads the book he sends me feedback on the Taylor White manuscript and is liking it as much as I did. Great stuff. New adventures. New zombies. New danger. This will be a 160 page sourcebook released in October, 2016. See Coming Attractions for details.

Robotech® RPG Tactics™

We are in the process of making a determination as to whether we can release **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Wave Two** game pieces with much fewer component parts, for fast, easy builds. We do not want to say anything more until we are certain of all the details, which we hope to have in a few weeks. We are also plotting and working on additional source material and support for the game line. Things are boiling for Robotech®.

Robotech® RPG Tactics™ is far from forgotten or abandoned by Palladium. In fact, we plan to start gearing up for much more support. We have been continuing to look into ways to produce figures with much fewer parts and deliver a high quality product. We're looking into something very exciting right now through a third party. We are also working toward providing much more support in many areas. Much more to come.

Gen Con Indy

– Palladium Books® Booth 823

Gen Con is expecting 70,000+ gamers to descend upon it this August. We hope Palladium Books (Booth #823 across from Fantasy Flight and Kenzer Company) will be a big part of the plans for those of you attending. There are dozens of scheduled Palladium gaming events including **Rifts®** and **Robotech® RPG Tactics™**, a special convention discount coupon you will NOT want to miss in the **Gen Con Coupon Book** (especially fans of **Rifts®** and **Robotech®**), and a bunch of Palladium madmen will be on hand to chat and sign books.

Highlights at Palladium Booth #823:

- Meet and chat with Palladium creators, and get books signed.
- Enjoy scheduled Palladium gaming events.
- Participate in Robotech® RPG Tactics™ demos.
- Get new game releases (and old).
- Rifts®, Robotech®, Dead Reign®, Heroes Unlimited™, Palladium Fantasy®, Splicers®, BTS™, and many other titles. A large selection of RPG products.

- Original art for sale. Meet artist Charles Walton II.
- See special convention offer in the *Gen Con Coupon Book!*
- Learn more about Savage Rifts® and other games. Have a blast.

Palladium Creators at the 2016 Gen Con:

- Brandon Aten – writer (Rifts® Madhaven, Triax 2, Sovietski)
 - Carmen Bellaire – writer and game designer
 - Michael Leonard – artist and game master
 - Mark Oberle – writer (Nightbane® Survival Guide, Rifter®)
 - Kevin Siembieda – Palladium founder, writer, artist, game designer
 - Wayne Smith – editor and Editor in Chief of The Rifter®
 - Thomas Roache – Robotech® advisor and demo
 - Jeff Ruiz (NMI) – Megaversal Ambassador
 - Charles Walton II – artist, writer and Splicehead.
- And maybe a couple others to be added.

Gen Con – Indianapolis, Indiana – August 4-7, 2016

www.gencon.com

Megaversal Ambassador Program

Megaversal Ambassadors are Palladium's growing network of volunteer Game Masters who run games and tournaments across the United States, Canada and abroad. If you like running gaming events and demos at conventions and stores, and you are not already part of the MA Program, please think about becoming an "official" ambassador for Palladium Books. Contact the **Palladium Megaversal Ambassadors** at ambassadors@palladium-books.com — or by telephone (734-721-2903).

Palladium Collectibles in my Online Toy & Collectibles Store

Palladium collectibles, hardcovers, out of print titles, original artwork and toys and items from my personal collection are all available on my ebay store. We add items on a regular basis and offer sales, so check it out from time to time. Includes one-of-a-kind original artwork, prints, **Rifts®** and **Robotech®** artwork by *Kevin Long, me* and *others*. There is also a range of limited editions, rare book titles and limited edition hardcovers, toys and more available with frequent new items added. Items include original art, out of print titles, redlined proofreader photocopies signed by me and the staff, signed manuscripts with editors' corrections, some original art, hardcover books (including **Rifts® Lemuria**, **Northern Gun™ One**, **Northern Gun™ Two**, **Megaverse® in Flames™**, **Beyond the Supernatural™ Gold**, **Rifts® Machinations of Doom™ Gold** and **Rifts® Ultimate Gold**), hundreds of toys and action figures, all from my personal archives and collection. Take a look every weekend or two for new items added.

<http://stores.ebay.com/kevinstoys-artandcollectibles>

Randi Cartier shocker

Palladium freelance writer dies unexpectedly

Randi Cartier passed away in May, 2016. She was only 63 and as feisty as ever. She had gone to the hospital for something minor. Nothing life threatening, so the news of her death was a shock to everyone, especially to her loving husband, Roger. I was so stunned and grief-stricken the day we got the news, I could not find the words to write about Randi in our online Update for that week. But she deserves to be spoken of, because she was very special.

Randi was a character, as are most gamers. She tended to be a power gamer. Her characters always looking for the big payoff, magic weapon (or armor, or device, etc.), and that big moment of heroics. She was fun and funny. Kind and loveable.

Randi and Roger played in my regular Saturday night Palladium Fantasy games for more than a decade, and only stopped because I became too busy to run a weekly game. She and Roger play-tested the original **Robotech® RPG** and **Beyond the Supernatural™** back in the mid-1980s, play-tested **Rifts®** in 1990, and contributed maps, text and ideas to the **Palladium Fantasy RPG®**. Fantasy was always Randi's favorite to play; mine too. Randi and Roger helped me through some difficult times, including my divorce, and helped me make improvements to the house so I could sell it.

During our **Robotech®** games, Randi would laugh and condemn my made up "legends of Canada" and hated the "Beaver Stomp" I incorporated into my 1980s **Robotech®** campaign. (Don't ask what that involved, but Kevin Long and I thought it was hilarious. Randi protested to the contrary.) She was very creative, full of ideas and talented. She had a knack for arts and crafts, cooking, and was a truly skilled, semi-professional miniature painter. I would look forward to Christmas which often included a new painted dragon or other figure as a gift from her.

Randi is also the person who prodded fellow Canadian *Carmen Bellaire* to submit some of his writing and ideas to Palladium Books. Carmen and I became fast friends and he has been a major contributor to Palladium Books ever since. Carmen has grown into a freakin' awesome game designer and one hell of a writer (*Splicers®*, *Powers Unlimited® series*, *Rifts® MercTown* and many others), but none of that might have happened if not for Randi Cartier. Just one example of how our lives touch so many others.

Randi was fun and a good player who I enjoyed very much in my games, even at her most outrageous. But more than that, Randi was an awesome human being. Kind and caring, easy to talk to, considerate and someone I could confide in. I think everyone who knew Randi loved her. I was actually planning a big Christmas surprise for Randi later this year and planned a surprise visit to her and Roger at their home in Canada, as I had something I wanted to give her, and we had not seen each other in a while.

I will deeply miss Randi's exuberance and big, sweet, friendly and generous personality. I am glad she was part of my life and my gaming experience. My heartfelt condolences to Roger, her family and friends. I will miss you, Randi, but I will never forget you. – KS

Coming Attractions

Palladium's 2016 Release Checklist

Available Now

- **Rifts® Chaos Earth® Resurrection™**
- **Rifts® Chaos Earth®: Rise of Magic™**
- **Robotech®: Expeditionary Force Marines™**
- **The Rifter® #71 & #72, Double Issue** – 224 pages.
- **The Rifter® #73, Official Source Material** – 96 pages.
- **Rifts® Heroes of Humanity™**
- **The Rifter® #74 – Spring issue** – 96 pages.

Coming in July

- **The Rifter® #75 – Summer issue** – 96 pages.
- **Robotech® The Masters Saga™** – New 8½ x 11 format – 160 pages.
- **Rifts® Heroes of Humanity™ ARSENAL** – 96-128 pages – in final production right now. Ships end of July or August.

Coming

- **Rifts® Secrets of the Atlanteans™ Sourcebook** by Carl Gleba – September, 2016.
- **Rifts® The Disavowed™ Sourcebook** by Kevin Siembieda and Matthew Clements. Ships October.
- **Dead Reign® Sourcebook: Hell Followed™** by Taylor White – a large, juicy, 160 page sourcebook – October.
- **Garden of the Gods™, a Palladium Fantasy RPG® Sourcebook** by Kevin Siembieda – Fall.
- **Rifts® Haunted Tech™ sourcebook** by Kevin Siembieda – Fall.
- **Rifts® Sovietski™ World Book** by Brandon Aten – Fall or Winter.
- **Lopan™, a Palladium Fantasy RPG® Adventure Sourcebook** by Glen Evans, additional material by Kevin Siembieda – Fall (tentative).
- **Chaos Earth® First Responders** – Fall (tentative).
- **Splicers® Sourcebooks**
- **Heroes Unlimited™ Sourcebooks**
- **Beyond the Supernatural™ Sourcebooks**
- **Robotech® RPG Sourcebooks**
- **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Wave 2 expansions packs**
- **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ source material and events.**
- **Rifts® World Books and Sourcebooks, including Rifts® Sovietski, Rifts® Antarctica, Rifts® New Navy, and others.**
- **And some surprises ...**

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

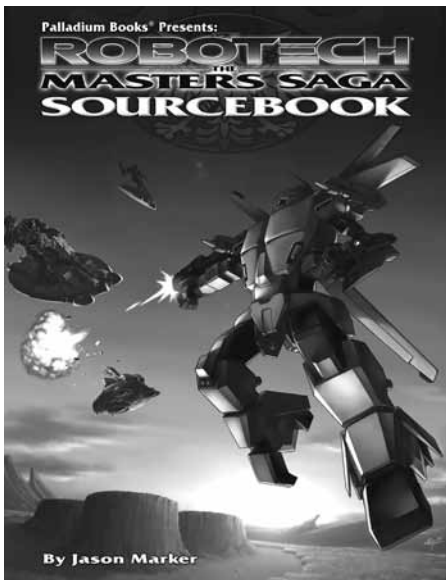
Ordering from Palladium Books: You can also order directly from Palladium Books, but you will pay extra for shipping. For customers with access to a computer, we highly recommend ordering online. This provides you with information about the most recent releases and Palladium's entire product catalog.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

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

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

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

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



Robotech®: The Masters Saga™

New, large format 8½ x 11 sourcebook – 160 pages

Robotech®: The Masters Saga™ is now available as a 160 page sourcebook in the large 8½ x 11 inch format.

Artwork is given the deluxe treatment – large, clear, and detailed to go along with a wealth of information about the **Second Robotech War**, the **Army of the Southern Cross**, its combat forces, mecha, weapons, and vehicles. With the same comprehensive treatment given to the invading **Robotech Masters**. Everything you could want to know about these combatants in the *Second Robotech War*.

Forget the corny drama, the emphasis of this sourcebook is on the Second Robotech War and the equipment on both sides. Making the Masters Saga a big mecha and equipment book that you will want in your collection. Did you know the Army of the Southern Cross used power armor and Battloids in addition to their famous mecha? You'll find out all about it in this comprehensive 160 page sourcebook. Much of it described and stated out in an "official" capacity for the very first time in this sourcebook. **Note:** Only the size, size of artwork and layout has changed. The text and data are the same as the manga-sized edition.

- **40+ weapons; pistols, rifles, grenade launchers.**
- **15 O.C.C.s and MOS skill packages for the 8 main branches of the ASC and the 7 Special Forces Divisions operating under the Tactical Corps.**
- **14 ASC vehicles of the Army of the Southern Cross (ASC).**
- **ASC Tactical battle shields, jet packs and other gear.**
- **ASC Veritech Mecha including the Ajax, Logan, Spartas Hover Tank, Myrmidon Light Hover Tank.**
- **6 ASC power armor suits.**
- **4 ASC Battloids.**
- **The Golem Autonomous Patrol Robot.**
- **The Robotech Masters and their legions.**
- **6 different Bioroids, as well as the Bioroid Terminator, the Bioroid Invid Fighter, hover sled & more.**
- **Tirolians, spacecraft and other gear and info.**
- **Cover by Apollo Okamura. Interior art by the Mannings and others.**
- **Written by Jason Marker.**
- **160 pages – \$20.95 retail – Cat. No. 556. July release. In final production.**

BACK in STOCK:

Wolfen Empire™ for Palladium Fantasy

The Wolfen Empire is growing. And that means trouble for humans, Dwarves and other people as the Wolfen flex their military might and begin to study magic in earnest.

The Wolfen Empire™ sourcebook provides insight and history about the Wolfen, their past, present and goals for the future. The Wolfen are poised to become the next great civilization, but at what cost? Six fleshed out adventures plus a 101 adventure ideas table give players and Game Masters plenty of material for exploring the Great Northern Wilderness and encounters with the Wolfen.

- **The 12 Wolfen Tribes, their history and legends.**
- **The Wolfen Empire, its economy and civilization.**
- **Wolfen Military, rank, position and plans.**
- **Geography of the Wolfen Empire.**
- **13 notable creatures of the North.**
- **101 Adventures Table and numerous other Random Encounter Tables.**
- **6 fleshed out adventures across the Great Northern Wilderness.**
- **A few infamous towns, villains and notable people.**
- **Cover by Ramon K. Perez. Art by Perez, Johnson, Talbot, Williams and others.**
- **Written by Erick Wujcik, Kevin Siembieda & Bill Coffin.**
- **160 pages – \$20.95 retail – Cat. No. 471. Back in stock July 1.**

BACK in STOCK:

Villains Unlimited™

for the Heroes Unlimited™ RPG series

It's the reference book that never gets old – 80+ superhuman villains, a secret organization that supplies villains and criminals, another that hunts superhumans, plus rules and tables for creating your own super-organizations, Game Master playing tips, and more.

All of it provides Game Masters with bad guys and ideas for adventure, because each description presents the villain's origin, motivation and goals. Just drop 'em into your campaign and watch the super abilities fly. That's why **Villains Unlimited™** has been a fan favorite for years.

- 80+ villains completely stated out.
- A few villain teams and organizations and their evil agendas.
- S.C.R.E.T. stands for *Superbeing Control, Retrieval and Elimination Teams* who are part of a multi-national organization to handle the "superhuman problem." Are they hunting your heroes?
- Fabricators Inc. is an international arms dealer whose exclusive clientele is superhuman bad guys and the criminal underworld.
- Magic Tattoos, weapons, cyborgs, a crazed world conqueror, madmen and adventure ideas galore await.
- Written by Kevin Siembieda and Kevin Long. Art by Kevin Long.
- 224 pages – \$24.95 retail – Cat. No. 501. Back in print July 1.

BACK in STOCK:

Century Station™

City, Villain & Heroes Sourcebook for Heroes Unlimited™ RPG

Century Station™ is a compelling cityscape described and mapped. It is a great location to base a **Heroes Unlimited™** campaign or a place to visit. The 51 superhuman villains, some of whom are members of villain teams, provide instant antagonists that can be dropped into any game at any time. Likewise, the 40 dynamic heroes can be used as NPCs (Non-Player Characters) or as pre-generated player characters, plus there are weapons, equipment and adventure ideas galore. All ready for you to incorporate into your campaign in an instant.

Each villain and hero provides Game Masters with ideas for adventure, because each description presents the villain's or hero's origin, motivation and goals. **Century Station™** and **Villains Unlimited™** are both excellent resources for gadgets, weapons and inspiration for creating your own heroes, villains and conflicts.

- 51 villains completely stated out.
- 40 heroes and lawmen to use as NPCs or pre-generated player characters.
- The District of Century Station, its history, purpose, problems, and notable locations mapped and described.
- Dozens of gadgets and weapons.
- Endless adventure.

- Cover by John Zeleznik. Interior art by Wilson and others.
- Written by Bill Coffin. Additional text by Siembieda.
- 224 pages – \$24.95 retail – Cat. No. 517. Back in print July 1.



BACK in STOCK:

After the Bomb® RPG

– Stand-alone game and suitable for Heroes Unlimited™ RPG

Ever wonder what it would be like to play an intelligent, humanoid eagle? What about a sword-wielding turtle or ninja rodent, or heroic wolfman, or a flying pig? In **After the Bomb®** you can turn a mouse into the size of a gorilla, or keep him small and sneaky, but with special animal powers, psychic abilities and human speech and intelligence. Or create that winged humanoid eagle who preys upon criminals. Or maybe that giant hamster, let alone mutant lion or tiger, is an animalistic brute who hunts other mutants (humans and animals!) and feasts upon them like a monstrous predator. The choices are yours.

After the Bomb® lets you mutate any animal you can think of, into a heroic crime-fighter set in our modern world or a mutant animal survivor of post-apocalyptic Earth — think *Planet of the Apes* on steroids. An environment where humans struggle to survive in a devastated (nuked?) world, and intelligent mutant animals appear to be the inheritors of the planet. Fun. Wild. Imaginative stories await.

The After the Bomb® RPG and its future world setting is one of the late, great, Erick Wujcik's most fun and lasting creations. Play it as a stand-alone game or use **AtB** as a resource to create mutant animals that can be dropped into your **Heroes Unlimited™** game, **Aliens Unlimited™**, **Rifts®**, **Phase World®**, **Robotech®** or just about any game setting. Play them as mutant animals or aliens from another world, heroes or villains, victim and fugitives, but get **After the Bomb®** because its mutant creations can fit many roles and are a blast to play in any setting.

- **100+ intelligent mutant animals already described, statted and ready for you to play.**
- **Mutant animal creation rules that lets you turn ANY animal into a mutant with human intelligence, a humanoid body (or not), and super animal powers and/or animal psionics.**
- **Mutant humans who sacrifice their humanity for super abilities.**
- **The blasted, post-apocalyptic setting and villains.**
- **Six post-apocalyptic After the Bomb® adventures.**
- **A complete role-playing game with core rules, skills, weapons and equipment, apocalyptic world setting and playing tips.**
- **Suitable for use with the *Heroes Unlimited™* RPG, and other RPG settings.**
- **Art by Kevin Eastman, Peter Laird, Jim Lawson, Ramon K. Perez, Freddie Williams II, Tyler Walpole and others.**
- **Cover by Scott Johnson.**
- **Written by Erick Wujcik.**
- **224 pages – \$24.95 retail – Cat. No. 503. Back in print July 1.**

Heroes Unlimited™ RPG

Want to play superhumans and caped heroes, mutants and aliens, power armor clad champions and super soldiers? The **Heroes Unlimited™** RPG lets you create them all and more.

The game is called **Heroes Unlimited™** because it enables you to create every type of superhuman and comic book hero you can imagine. Bring your favorite comic book heroes to life or create an entirely hero of your own design. Then weave adventure adventures set in our modern world but one where superhumans, heroes and villains make our world and even more exciting and dangerous. If you know and love comic books, you know what happens next.

A complete game, all you need to get started is this 352 page rule book, a few friends, dice and an imagination. With several sourcebooks books back in stock, and comic book heroes the rage in film and TV, we thought we would remind people about just how awesome the **Heroes Unlimited™** RPG really is. Order yours today.

- **101 super abilities. And many have a variety of sub-powers within them, plus bonuses and special combat capabilities.**
- **100+ magic spells plus enchanted weapons and objects.**



- **Wizards and those enchanted and empowered by magic.**
- **72 psychic powers.**
- **Mutants with super abilities and mutant animals.**
- **Mega-Heroes and immortals.**
- **Bionic and power armor creation rules.**
- **Robots and super-vehicle creation rules.**
- **Super-Soldiers and martial arts masters.**
- **Cover by comic book legend, Jim Steranko.**
- **Art by Ramon K. Perez, Paulo Parente, Mike Gustovich, Kevin Long and others and others.**
- **Written by Kevin Siembieda.**
- **352 pages for a complete RPG – \$26.95 retail – Cat. No. 500.**

NEW! Rifts® Heroes of Humanity™

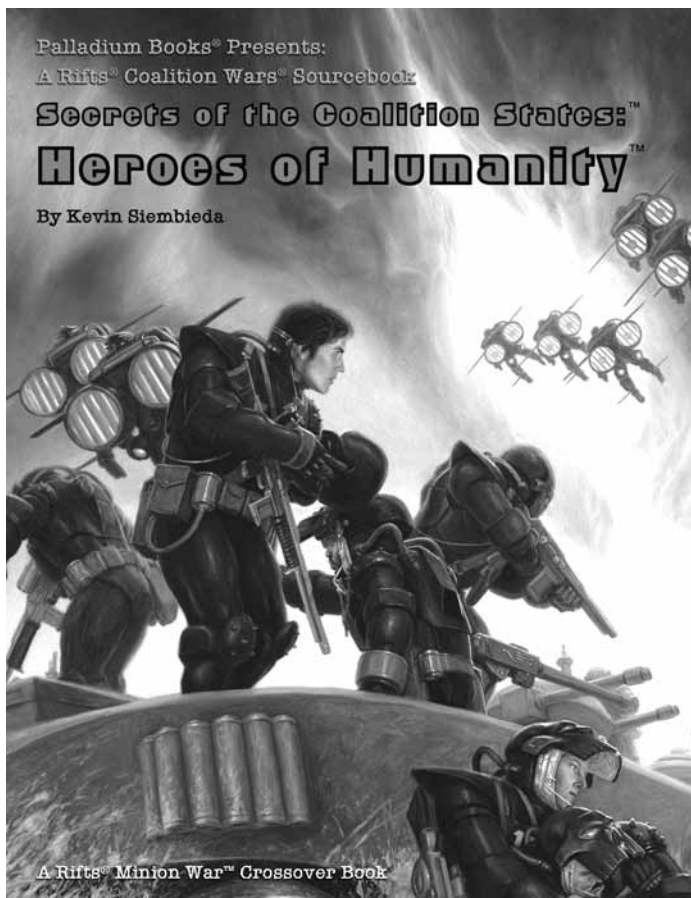
Secrets of the Coalition States™ – Available now

Rifts® CS Heroes of Humanity™ changes the landscape of Rifts North America and beyond, as well as presents ways to upgrade and improve existing Men-At-Arms characters with Advanced Training and includes new character classes, weapons, equipment, alliances and conflict to inspire epic new adventures.

Rifts® Heroes of Humanity™ is the battle for the soul of humanity. The Minion War™ has spilled onto Rifts Earth. At the epicenter of the invasion is *North America*. If either of the two rival demonic forces succeeds in conquering the continent, the rest of the world shall follow and Earth will be annexed to Hell. The demon hordes believe no one can stop them. The Coalition States has something to say about that.

For the first time in history, the Coalition States, Northern Gun, the Manistique Imperium, Lazlo, New Lazlo, Free Quebec, the Cyber-Knights, Lemurians, True Atlanteans, D-Bees, mages, mercs and many, many others stand together against a common enemy. Meanwhile, *the Splugorth of Atlantis*, *Archie Three*, *the Republicans* and *the Vanguard* engage in their own shadow war against the invading demon hordes, and each other.

- ***Heroes of Humanity™* lets unprecedented types of characters gather in mixed groups that would otherwise be ideologically opposed. Together they fight side-by-side for the greater good.**



- New ways to upgrade your existing Men-at-Arms characters.
- Coalition Demon Hunter school and advanced training programs.
- New Coalition O.C.C.s like the Death Knight and Skelebot Specialist.
- Coalition military O.C.C.s expanded such as the CS Juicers, CS Combat Cyborgs, Psycho-Stalkers, Coalition psychics and more.
- New CS gear such as the Hellbuster and Falcon Death Wing.
- CS battle plans, world information and many adventure ideas.
- The strategies and tactics of the demons against humanity.
- The strategies and tactics of the Coalition States and its allies.
- Summary of Demon and Deevil vulnerabilities.
- One Xiticix battle plan and who really pays the price.
- Plenty of guidelines, tables and rules to help you run it all.
- Art by Charles "Chuck" Walton II, Nick Bradshaw, Mark Dudley, Allen Manning, Brian Manning, Mike Mumah, Siembieda and others.
- Written by Kevin Siembieda, Gleba, Clements and others.
- 160 pages – \$20.95 retail – Cat. No. 889. Available now!

NEW! Heroes of Humanity™ Arsenal

Rifts® Secrets of the Coalition States™ Sourcebook

Rifts® Heroes of Humanity gave you updated Coalition Army O.C.C.s, ways to upgrade men-at-arms, new O.C.C.s, battle plans and strategies and tactics. CS Heroes of Humanity™

Arsenal provides an array of new Coalition hardware: weapons, armor, additional SAMAS, other power armor, robots, combat vehicles, gear and info.

- New CS weapons and gear.
- New CS SAMAS and power armor.
- New CS robots and combat vehicles.
- More secrets and information about the Coalition States.
- Wild adventure opportunities, fun and more.
- Part of the *Minion War™* "Crossover" series.
- Written by Kevin Siembieda, Clements, Gleba and others.
- 96 pages – \$16.95 retail – Cat. No. 893. July release (tentative). May slide into an August release. In final production.



NEW! Rifts® Secrets of the Atlanteans

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

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

- True Atlanteans revisited.
- Optional Atlantean character creation tables including clan heritage and other factors.
- Secrets of the stone pyramids, different types/purposes and powers.
- Many new magic tattoos, magic spells, weapons and armor.
- Atlantean hideouts and secret communities across the Megaverse.
- The Sunaj Assassins, their secrets, history and plans for the future.
- Atlantean Monster Hunter O.C.C., Atlantean Defender O.C.C. and much more.
- Cover by John Zeleznik. Interior art by Walton and others.
- Written by Carl Gleba. Additional material by Kevin Siembieda.
- Final page count and price yet to be determined, but probably 192 pages – \$24.95 retail – Cat. No. 890. September release. In final production!



Rifts® World Book 28: Arzno™

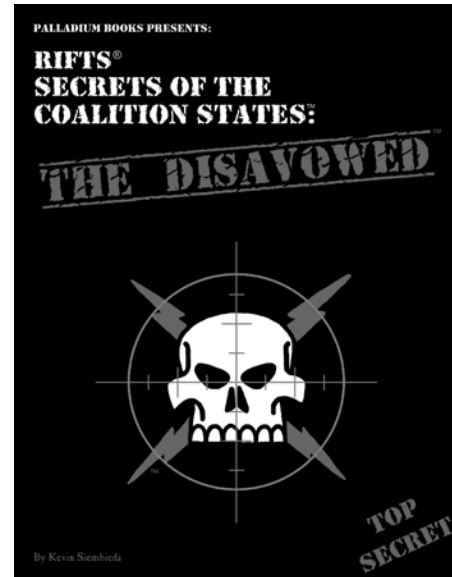
Looking for vampire slayers and vampire TW devices, you need to visit **Arzno**. A mercenary city built on the edge of the Grand Canyon. It is a force for good, but threatened by the encroaching vampire menace from Mexico who have marked the mercs for destruction. **Arzno™** has plenty of fun source material, dozens of Techno-Wizard devices, power armor and weapons, a vampire invasion adventure scenario and other adventure ideas. Available from Palladium in book form and as a *PDF* from DriveThruRPG.com.

- **The City and Territory of Arzno™** described and mapped. A good place for adventurers to trade goods and resupply.
- **The Arzno Mercenary Corps**, notable heroes and people of Arzno.
- **36 Techno-Wizard creations** including TW weapons, power armor, vehicles and devices, most designed for combatting vampires!
- **The Vampire legions of General Xavier Stuart** and a sinister Blood Cult.
- **The ghost-filled forest** known as the Waste and some of the monsters found there.
- **The Great Trade Road** and many other notable locations.
- **Looking for adventure?** Arzno offers it.
- **Cover by John Zeleznik. Art by Walton, Dubisch, Breaux and others.**
- **Written by Jason Richards. Additional text by Kevin Siembieda.**
- **160 pages – \$20.95 retail – Cat. No. 868. Available now in PDF as well as book form.**

Rifts® The Disavowed

Secrets of the Coalition States™

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



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

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

NEW!

Rifts® Haunted Tech™ Sourcebook

Faced with the imminent threat of the Minion War and ensuing demon plagues across Rifts® North America, heroes and nations rise! Archie Three is taking none of it lying down. The insane machine-god is obsessed with sending the demons back to Hell and saving “his” world.

- **The Republicans reveal themselves and take action. Yes, that means Chaos Earth NEMA O.C.C.s, robots and technology in Rifts® Earth.**
- **Archie Three takes action behind the scenes, in a big way.**

- New menaces appear.
- Haunted Tech gives new meaning to “ghost in the machine.” But are they a godsend or a Pandora’s Box of new danger?
- The new rules, powers and abilities for Haunted Tech will blow your mind.
- Adventure ideas, plot hooks and more.
- Written by Kevin Siembieda. Additional ideas from Charles Walton II.
- Final page count, price and catalog number yet to be determined, but probably 96 pages – \$16.95 retail. Fall release.

NEW! Garden of the Gods™

A Palladium Fantasy RPG® Sourcebook

This has been a secret project of Kevin Siembieda’s that he has been plotting and writing in what little spare time he has. The Garden of the Gods is said to be a holy place watched over and even frequented by the avatars of the gods. According to legend, the god may visit heroes and followers in dreams or in person by an avatar of the god, to be given guidance, inspiration, heroic quests, and gifts of knowledge and magic. More details about this title will follow.

- The Garden of the Gods described in detail.
- Godly insight and visitations.
- Gifts of magic and knowledge.
- Sanctuary and more.
- The Black Pit, a place of evil and dark secrets. Is it a counterbalance to the good of the Garden or a trick of the Old Ones?
- Written by Kevin Siembieda.
- Final page count, price and catalog number yet to be determined, but probably 96 pages – \$16.95 retail. A Fall release.



NEW! Hell Followed™

A Dead Reign® Zombie Apocalypse Sourcebook

At 160 pages, **Hell Followed™** is the largest **Dead Reign® sourcebook** yet. Artist Nick Bradshaw is already fast at work on the art. Cover by E.M. Gist is finished.

Can you survive the Zombie Apocalypse? Find out by playing the **Dead Reign® RPG**. This post apocalypse setting is only picking up steam and is much more than just about killing the walking dead. And future sourcebooks will delve deeper into the survivor camps, the new world order and human heroes and villains.

- 10 new types of zombies.
- New O.C.C.s and skills.
- Running zombie horde battle.
- Disasters and other dangers.
- The US government’s response to the Zombie Apocalypse
- Government enclaves and survivor camps.
- More world information, new dangers and new adventurers.
- Cover by E.M. Gist. Interior art Nick Bradshaw.
- Written by Taylor White. The biggest **Dead Reign** sourcebook yet.
- 160 pages – \$20.95 retail – Cat. No. 236. October 2016 release. In final production.

Robotech® RPG Tactics™

Wave Two is coming ... but you can get started with the core box set and Wave One expansions right now

If you love Robotech®, you want to take a look at this game. Beautifully detailed game pieces of your favorite Robotech® mecha, and fast playing rules that capture the Robotech® experience in a new, exciting way. And this is just the beginning. We have so much more planned in the years ahead.

- **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Box Set (Main Box Game) – Cat. No. 55100 – \$99.95 retail price.** This is the game Robotech® fans have wanted for decades. **Robotech® RPG Tactics™** is a fast-paced, tabletop combat game that captures the action and adventure of the **Robotech®** anime. Two or more players can engage in small squad skirmishes or scale up to massive battles. Relive the clashes of the First Robotech War, engage in stand-alone tactical games, or use the dynamic game pieces to enhance your Robotech® RPG experience. Or simply collect your favorite mecha from an expanding range of top-notch game pieces. Get yours now, so you can build your armies and have them ready when Wave Two is released.

The First Six Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Expansion Packs are available to retail along with the main box game. Here are the SKUs and retail prices.

- **UEDF Valkyrie Wing – Cat. No. 55201 – \$36.95 retail.**
- **UEDF Tomahawk/Defender Destroids – Cat. No. 55202 – \$32.95 retail.**
- **UEDF Spartan/Phalanx Destroids – Cat. No. 55203 – \$32.95 retail.**
- **Zentraedi Regult Battlepods – Cat. No. 55401 – \$36.95 retail.**
- **Zentraedi Artillery Battlepods – Cat. No. 55402 – \$36.95 retail.**
- **Zentraedi Glaug Command – Cat. No. 55403 – \$36.95 retail.**
- **Robotech® RPG Tactics™ Rulebook – Cat. No. 55105 – \$20.00 retail.** Note: This is the same rulebook that is included in the main game box, and is offered separately for those who want an extra copy, or want to check out the rules before buying the whole game.

The Town of Moorcroft

Official source material for Rifts®

By Julius Rosenstein

Additional text and ideas by Kevin Siembieda

Moorcroft Overview

Population: 1,345 (includes both the town itself and ranches and farms associated with it).

Population Breakdown:

Humans 81% (30% are of Native American descent).

D-Bees 19%

Typical Alignments: Principled (25%), Scrupulous (35%), Unprincipled (20%) and Anarchist (15%).

The following information is generally (if not commonly) known

Moorcroft is a town in the northeastern part of Wyoming. The town and its outlying farms and ranches are surrounded by grasslands and dense forests. Some of which are inhabited by Faeries and Great Little Ones, as well as many tribes of Native Americans. Due to the scarcity of people in this area, Moorcroft's population of some 1,300 people, humans and D-Bees, make the town one of the largest permanent settlement in this area for many miles around. There are a couple of local tribes that are larger but they are nomadic and do not stay anywhere permanently.

For those who have heard of it, Moorcroft is known as a quiet, civil place where travelers can stop to rest and resupply for staples such as food and water, at reasonable prices, and get gasoline at high-end prices. Moorcroft also has a good number of Shamans, some of whom may have magic fetishes and charms for sale. There are mages – some of them unusual types for North America – who are sometimes willing to join on an adventure as long as they get a fair cut of any profits or discoveries, and they can arrange to be eventually taken back to Moorcroft.

The following information is not generally known

Much like an iceberg, where the bulk of it is unseen, there is far more to the town of Moorcroft than meets the eye. Moorcroft is situated on the site of a Hidden Nexus. For generations, its inhabitants have taken advantage of it to magically empower themselves without being obvious to the outside world or hostile forces. Consequently, there is a far greater number of mages than what you would expect to see in a settlement with a population of 1,345 people.

Breakdown of Moorcroft Mages:

46 Ley Line Walkers (**Rifts® Ultimate Edition RPG**, pages 113-116)

20 Ley Line Rifters (**Rifts® Ultimate Edition RPG**, pages 116-118)

34 Star Children (**Rifts® England**, pages 53-54)

99 Shamans (various; **Rifts® Spirit West**, pages 48-69)

13 Fire Sorcerers (**Rifts® Mystic Russia**, pages 109-111)

9 Slayers (as in demon slayers; **Rifts® Mystic Russia**, pages 136-138)

19 Mystics (**Rifts® Ultimate Edition RPG**, pages 118-120)

7 Techno-Wizards (**Rifts® Ultimate Edition RPG**, pages 113-116)

25 Other Practitioners of Magic (various)

272 total. Roughly 20% of the townspeople. Average level of experience, 1D4+2 or as the G.M. finds desirable. Of course, some are much more experienced.

Pre-Cataclysm Moorcroft

Moorcroft existed before the Great Cataclysm. It was established in the late 19th Century, when the railroad built a line to the “Old Texas Trail.” For awhile, Moorcroft became the largest shipping point in the United States. However, as time went by, the town was passed over by many in the business community and dwindled in importance. By the beginning of the 21st Century, Moorcroft had shrunk down to a town of 800 people.

However, though small, Moorcroft was still fairly prosperous thanks to industries such as ranching and lumber, as well as providing service for the coal and oil industries as a storage center. The town even saw a bit of tourism as it was on the way to *Big Horn National Park*, and vacationers heading to the Park would often visit the town as they passed through the area.

Post-Cataclysm Moorcroft

When the Great Cataclysm struck, Moorcroft lucked out, relatively speaking, that is. Though the town sustained damage and people died, it escaped the worst of the many disasters and demon plagues that swept the country and across the globe. As a result, losses were light and more than half the population managed to survive.

After the Great Cataclysm, the people of Moorcroft faced many challenges and struggles you would expect with the surviving of the Apocalypse, but they did survive. Being so small, isolated and “in the middle of nowhere,” as they say, worked to the town's advantage. It was seldom visited by outsiders, aliens or plagues, and all the worst catastrophes seemed to miss them. Whether this good fortune has anything to do with the fact the community rests on a Dim Nexus ley line system is unknown, but it may have. All of this gave the townspeople the opportunity to rebuild and become one of the few survivor groups in the State. Over time, other survivors began to drift to Moorcroft. Many used the town as a pit stop, a place to rest up for awhile, resupply and move on. Others never left and became useful members of the community, preferring isolation over the unknown beyond the prairie and mountains. Other survivors in the region were Native Americans, many of whom forsook technology to return to the old traditions. Over the decades they would master the old ways and rediscover ancient magic. With the town of Moorcroft “always there” and open to all survivors, their relationship with Native Traditionalists grew as the tribal communities grew, building strong ties between their respective communities. At least 25% percent of the people born in Moorcroft marry into one of the many tribal clans, and this relationship has given the town a distinct Native American flavor; 30% of its citizens having Native American ancestry.

Over the years, the town has had its population swell and decline, mostly the result of plagues and battles against monsters and inhuman invaders. Despite that, the people of Moorcroft are a generous and peaceful people who accept all peace-loving beings – human, D-Bee and otherwise. Another reason for the low population is that as peaceful and relatively safe as the community is, inevitably there are those driven by wanderlust and a desire to see the world or find adventure. They go off and just never return. One hopes they are alive and well, living in prosperity, but the reality is most perish within the first six months of leaving town.

As the decades passed and more inhabitants of Moorcroft took up magic, they noticed there seemed to be an inordinate number of people





who not only exhibited an aptitude for magic but who also possessed higher amounts of P.P.E. than what is normal. Eventually, they came to realize their town was located at the intersection (nexus) of two ley lines. A Hidden Nexus ley line network whose mystic energies were enhancing the magic potential of those who were born locally. Without knowing it, they were a community of *Nexus Born*. This far greater proportion of practitioners of magic, the town's geographic isolation, and good relationship with Native American tribes had given them an edge at surviving in a hostile world.

Moorcroft is, for the most part, pretty isolated as this region is sparsely populated. Aside from the occasional traveling band of Simvan Monster Riders looking for trouble, Psi-Stalker or wandering adventurers, Moorcroft's main neighbors are a number of local Native American tribes, several Cyber-Knights from nearby bases on patrols or quests, and the Faeries that inhabit some of the surrounding woods (including *Great Little Ones* they mistake as Faeries). Fortunately, Moorcroft is able to maintain friendly relations with all of their neighbors. Other than these people, nobody has ever heard of the town.

Overall, the townspeople realize how lucky they are, enjoy what they consider to be peaceful, ordinary lives, and try to avoid trouble. They keep their secrets about the Hidden Nexus and the town's abundance of Nexus Born practitioners of magic. However, the townsfolk are not paranoid about these secrets and are hospitable to well-intentioned visitors.

Since some of their own citizens travel outside the town for various reasons (quests with Cyber-Knights, visits to Native American villages, travel to broaden their own horizons and see what the rest of the world is like, and so on), trying to keep the town's existence a total secret from the outside world is not feasible. Instead, the town's leaders have adopted a policy of asking their citizens who travel to simply acknowledge that the town is there but that it is very mundane and ordinary. "What, Moorcroft, my hometown? Yeah, nice place. Small town of just a few hundred people. Farmers mostly. Magic? Oh yeah, there are a few Shamans and a couple of Ley Line Walkers, but that's about it. You don't have much need for mages when nothin's going on, right? The winters? Oh, yeah, they can be brutal, 8 to 10 feet of snow over night, but all in all, it's a nice, quiet little place to grow up. Downright peaceful, if you like that kind of thing. Which is why I had to leave, not that I'm complaining. A lot of folks are happy to have carved out a dull, little place to live, you know? But me, I want adventure."

Foreign Relations

Native Tribes. The local Native American tribes include Bannock, Shoshone, Crow and some other clans. Having survived the Two Hundred Years Dark Ages where life was precious, the people of Moorcroft have had few differences and little trouble with the Native Americans. The townsfolk and local tribes have helped each other out more times than can be remembered, and hold each other in high regard. In fact, with Native Tribes representing most of the people in the region, townsfolk are well versed in the lore and traditions of their neighbors, and have even adopted many of them for themselves. For example, most of the town's youth go to the *Big Horn Medicine Wheel* in the mountains two hundred miles (320 km) away to get vision quests and guidance from the spirits that "walk the Wheel" and wait to advise young braves. Likewise, young men and women often marry into the tribes, and vice versa, so relations and friendships are very strong between the townsfolk and tribes. Even the most strident "traditionalists" among the Native American population accept Moorcroft as being neutral territory and its people as "brothers and sisters" who understand and accept the ways of The People. (See **Rifts® World Book 15: Spirit West** for a wealth of information about the Native people of Rifts Earth, their magic and beliefs, as well as monsters, evil spirits, good spirits and deities.)

On several occasions, Moorcroft has acted as the host for various tribes for festivals and as mediators to settle disputes between squabbling tribes. The elders and leaders of Moorcroft are happy to serve as unbiased mediators and counselors. Also, to remain on good terms with several of their more powerful Native American neighbors, Moorcroft

provides annual "gifts" of magical fetishes to various chiefs, medicine men, notable warriors, and other influential members of the tribes. This is an informal method of showing respect, appreciation and paying tribute that still allows all the parties involved to save face. In return for this tribute and other services provided by Moorcroft (mediation, trading partner, allies, etc.), the tribes often act as an unofficial buffer between the town of Moorcroft and outside forces – human, D-Bees and otherwise – helping to keep dangerous invaders and monsters away.

Coalition States and other Civilized Kingdoms. None. The town is not on the Coalition's radar and the townsfolk want to keep it that way. They have no interest in establishing ties to any of the city-states and nations developing out east and down south. Not Lazlo. Not the Federation of Magic or the Colorado Baronies, or Pecos Empire. They don't even associate with the Tundra Rangers or the First Cavalry. None of them. Isolation and secrecy has kept them alive since the Great Cataclysm and they intend to keep it that way.

Cyber-Knights. These champions of justice are always welcome in Moorcroft. They protect the lands and defend all peaceful people in the region. The Knights also bring the latest news and rumors with them, and always have wonderful stories to tell, as well as bringing warnings about potential new dangers. Cyber-Knights have an informal policy of allowing mages from Moorcroft to accompany them on patrols, quests and adventures. Over the decades, more than a few young men and women of Moorcroft have, themselves, become Cyber-Knights. Becoming a Knight or joining them on adventures is entirely voluntary – the Cyber-Knights have never forced anyone into service – and this has proven beneficial to both sides. The Cyber-Knights obtain extra magical muscle and those mages who survive and return to Moorcroft are much more worldly, experienced and powerful.

Since *Sir Antranek* has come to stay in Moorcroft, he has acted as a liaison between the Cyber-Knights and the town, helping to expedite matters and further improving the friendly relations between both groups. Most local Cyber-Knights also maintain good relations with the Native Americans, so there is no awkwardness because of the town's relationship with both.

Faeries. Faerie Folk are generally flighty, mischievous, and not well disposed toward humans. However, the Moorcroft Shamans, the Plant Shamans, in particular, have made a determined effort to befriend the Faeries in the nearby forests, and an arrangement has been reached between them. In exchange for a fairly steady supply of treats such as candy, honey, jam and other sweets to the Faeries, logging parties from Moorcroft (under the supervision of Shamans) are permitted to "harvest" trees in the forest without harassment by the Faeries; other than the occasional prank. Also, when strangers enter the forest, the Faeries often send word to Moorcroft to warn them about this.

Lynn-Srial. The people of Moorcroft have no direct contact with the D-Bee masters of Cloud Magic, but trade with them indirectly via the Cyber-Knights, their mutual friends and allies.

Monsters of the New West. There is no shortage of monsters prowling the prairies, forests and mountain ranges of what has become known as *the New West*. Creatures we would consider to be dinosaurs, the wicked Devil Unicorn, murderous Oborus-Slithers, the deceptive Great Dream Snakes, Panthera-Tereon, Rhino-Buffalo, Tree Spiders, Leath-erwings, and many others abound in this part of what was once the old American Empire. Among the most hated and feared are *Worm Wraiths* which have been encountered around Moorcroft on too many occasions to be taken lightly. (See **Rifts® World Book 14: New West** for details on these and other monsters of the West.)

Psi-Stalkers. Though tribes of Psi-Stalkers roam the northwest and much of Wyoming, they are not very numerous around Moorcroft or the Big Horn Mountains where the mystical Medicine Wheel is located. When Psi-Stalkers are encountered, they are either there to fight monsters or demons, or to engage their ongoing rivalry with Simvan. Some of the Native American tribes have issues with aggressive Psi-Stalker tribes whom they see as rival people, but such clashes are usually short-lived and without too much bloodshed. Many Psi-Stalkers in the region have heard of Moorcroft but have no reason to go there. When Psi-Stalkers do

arrive in the town, it is usually more out of curiosity than anything else, and they usually leave without incident. Bands and tribes of Psi-Stalkers spend most of their time hunting the many monsters and supernatural beings that roam the New West. (See **Rifts® World Book 14: New West** for details on the monsters, people and O.C.C.s of this wild wilderness.)

Simvan Monster Riders. The travel routes of the murderous, nomadic Simvan tribes usually swing just east of Moorcroft and miss the town. From time to time, however, there are violent clashes. Simvan sometimes target the town to rustle cattle and kidnap people. Other times, bands of young warriors who are out to prove themselves or with a hate on for humans, ride in to reap havoc and kill whomever they encounter. They usually receive a harsh awakening, however, when the Shamans and mages of the town respond with magic that either sends the Monster Riders packing or wipes them out in short order. *Native Americans*, *Psi-Stalkers* and any *Cyber-Knights* in the area are also likely to come to the town's defense, joining in the fight and chasing off even the largest and most hostile Simvan forces. Native Americans have no love for the Simvan, whom they consider monstrous invaders. Their clashes are frequent and bloody. So are the battles between Psi-Stalkers and Simvan, both of which are beginning to consider the other mortal enemies. In the case of Psi-Stalkers attacking Simvan who threaten Moorcroft, it is not so much that they are protecting the townspeople, but rather see it as an opportunity to kill Simvan and the monsters they ride.

Economy

Moorcroft is completely self-sufficient with limited trade with the people and tribes around them as noted above.

Cattle. Although this was one of Moorcroft's major resources from pre-Rifts times, cattle remains a major resource. They raise both domestic animals (everything from chickens and pigs to cattle) and more sturdy alien fare such as Great Plains Buffalo. They also hunt the Great Plains Buffalo and a variety of dinosaurs that are delicious to eat. The local ranches manage to raise enough animals to supply the needs of the town, year long, even through severe winters. Of course, livestock and meat are traded with Moorcroft's neighbors and sold to visitors.

Coal. Formerly one of the major resources in pre-Rifts times, Moorcroft's pre-Cataclysm stockpile of coal has been seriously depleted. Fortunately, the local coal mines still produce enough for the town's modest needs, with a small surplus for trading.

Lumber. Another of Moorcroft's major resources in pre-Rifts days, much less lumber is produced than before the Cataclysm. There are two reasons for this, respect for the land and their Native American allies, and very little trade outside their own community. Lumber operations today, are careful to select, harvest and cultivate trees; no clear cutting. Moorcroft has worked out an agreement with their Faerie neighbors that allows them to harvest trees in exchange for treats (candy, honey, etc.). So as not to offend or alienate the Faeries, which specific trees are permitted to be cut are carefully regulated by the town's resident Plant Shamans.

Magic. With so many practitioners of magic present, there is a steady market for magic items among the locals in Moorcroft, itself, and with neighboring tribesmen, Cyber-Knights, Lynn-Srial and even Psi-Stalkers. Mages may also hire themselves out, or their services, to adventurers, Cyber-Knights, tribal people, etc.

Oil. Much like coal, above, Moorcroft's pre-Cataclysm stockpile of oil has dwindled. Unfortunately, the local oil wells dried up long ago, forcing Moorcroft to husband and ration their oil supplies. Moorcroft sometimes sells oil to outsiders, albeit at inflated prices, in exchange for hard to get goods like vehicles, energy weapons, body armor, batteries and generators, but unless new sources of oil are found, they expect to be out of oil within a few decades. The sale of oil and magic items to the "outside world" is usually handled through a third party representative, like a Cyber-Knight, who often works through a third party mercenary or adventurer or merchant he knows. And always on a "no questions asked" basis, keeping Moorcroft's existence a secret.

Tourism. None! Before the Great Cataclysm, Moorcroft was a tourist attraction and tourism one of the town's sources of income. Today

however, even though Moorcroft is the largest permanent settlement in this area, because of the scarcity of people in the general area and desire for anonymity and secrecy, tourism in Moorcroft is nonexistent. Sure, the occasional traveler, local tribesmen, wandering Cyber-Knight, huntsman and the rare adventurer find their way to town, but Moorcroft is a quiet, isolated community with no desire to become a trading post or big town.

Businesses & Places of Interest

Note: Moorcroft is very much an Old West-style town for home-steaders. There are some modern weapons, E-Clips, vehicles, combat vehicles, generators, and so on. They know about modern technology and though rare, have seen cyborgs, giant robots, and aircraft. They are not uneducated bumpkins. HOWEVER, this *is* a low-tech town. Most houses and businesses are heated via fireplaces and illuminated with lanterns, torches and bee's wax candles. Farms and homes usually have a fire pit in the backyard as well. Magic is the great equalizer and primary means of defense and it is used to compensate for the lack of technology. Only a few of the businesses and the Community Center have Northern Gun electric generators.

1. Better Buildings Systems (BBS): If businesses or homes need to be built (usually of wood), repaired or renovated, BBS is the company to contact. They have a staff of architects, contractors, and builders who are expert at building homes, barns, silos, fences, corrals, pens, digging wells, mine shafts and other types of construction. And it is BBS who, with the townspeople, who built the concrete and log palisade walls and other defenses around the town. Their rates are fair, but a bit on the pricey side, though their work is top-quality.

2. Hillside Garden Supplies: This business sells and trades all types of seeds for crops, herbs, flowers, and plants. They also sell a wide range of garden and farm equipment and other items for gardens and farms at reasonable prices. This includes basic supplies like rope, string, wire, chicken wire, stakes, nails, screws, pegs, shovels, garden tools, etc. Almost everyone in town has their own small to medium vegetable garden and flower garden.

3. Moorcroft Bank: First established in pre-Cataclysm times, the bank handles virtually all of the town's financial transactions, using their own paper, coin and credit system. If approached by adventurers wanting to use Universal Credits, the bank trades them one Moorcroft dollar for two credits. Though the town does not have much need for the "credits" of nations outside their community, they realize there may be some value to it in the future, and keeps a modest stockpile of credits on hand. The bank may also be willing to "purchase" vehicles, weapons, ammunition, medical supplies, sweeteners, spices, and equipment from adventurers which they either trade to others or use for the town's defense or to supply young, local adventurers. Gold, silver, furs, food supplies and magic items are also always of interest to the Moorcroft Bank. However, the bank is very conservative and they NEVER pay top dollar. By the way, "pay" is usually a trade of goods and/or services or Moorcroft Dollars. Since they are literally the only bank in town, outsiders can take their lowball offers or leave them. **Note:** Barter of goods and services is common throughout the town, and most farmers, businesses and people are willing to make fair trades with each other and visitors.

4. Valley Community Center and Mayor's Office: This center not only hosts the offices of the mayor and town council, but is also the meeting place for the community during times of crisis and celebration. This building has a recreation hall, an auditorium (often used for town meetings and for putting on community theater productions), a municipal swimming pool, large kitchen and a cafeteria. Next door is a large gymnasium-type building as well as two barns, three grain silos, a stable, and a covered canopy area that serves as a farmer's market. There is almost always booth space available for new vendors.

5. Brightmoor Drugstore: A full-service establishment, this pharmacy specializes in holistic medicine, has three Healing Shamans and a psychic healer on staff. It also sells a wide range of fresh and dried herbs,

some fresh produce, healing tonics and salves, soap and basic medical supplies and grooming equipment (razors, nail clippers, scissors, toothpaste, combs, brushes, etc.).

6. United Radio Station: Moorcroft has a small radio tower and station from the pre-Rifts days that it has kept in working order. It is used to listen to outside transmissions that might tip the town off to approaching outsiders, but it is mostly used for emergency broadcasts and daily news and weather reports, music and some radio theater for entertainment. The station's normal hours are 5:00 to 7:00 AM and 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM weekdays and 4:00 to 7:00 PM on Sundays.

7. Moorcroft Lumberyard: Ever since pre-Cataclysm days, one of the town's major natural resources has been lumber. After the Great Cataclysm, the local forests regrew and lumber remains a major resource for Moorcroft. The lumberyard includes a sawmill and machine shops to make barrels, wagons and wooden wheels. Prices are very reasonable.

8. Downtowner Motor Inn: This is the site of the original tourist motel that has been maintained with pride as one of the town's "historical landmarks." This is where most visitors end up staying (unless they are welcomed to stay at someone's home; a great honor). However, due to the general lack of visiting outsiders, the Downtowner has taken in several long-term tenants and has turned the largest conference room into a small museum filled with pre-Rifts artifacts from books and framed posters to all kinds of items. The amenities are equivalent to a three-star hotel at inexpensive prices. Furthermore, as an inducement, patrons who remain longer than two weeks see their room rate decreased by 20% (a 33% discount if they stay for several months).

The hotel has a nice little diner that is frequented by local citizens. House specialties include beef and biscuits with gravy, coffee, fruit juices, delicious fruit pies and jam, honey-baked ham, and their own wine and moonshine, as well as the local beer.

9. Moorcroft Livery: This is a combination stable and livestock market. Travelers can stable their horses here as well as purchase new horses and other animals (such as cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens, etc.). Stabling costs are reasonable. For buying animals, good work and riding horses tend to be a little on the expensive side (but not outrageously so). Other livestock go for fair prices and are roughly half what they would cost at most other towns in the South or East.

10. Trident Motors: Most residents walk or ride horses and use horse-drawn wagons, but there are some vehicles in town, including a couple dozen combat vehicles used by the militia. Trident Motors is Moorcroft's garage and motor pool. Visitors can park their vehicles here and not have to worry about them being vandalized or stolen. Trident's security system includes trusted guards and mages. Trident sometimes has odd vehicles and parts for sale, usually left by some adventurer. Prices are generally reasonable but, since these are used vehicles, even when repaired and refurbished, they may still not be entirely reliable.

Trident's Operators can make most simple repairs on vehicles, but getting special parts can take weeks or months, and may be impossible for them. Travelers who can make the repairs themselves can purchase or trade for the available parts from Trident at reasonable rates. It should be noted that the well-intentioned Trident Operators are good mechanics, but not exceptional. On average, they are only 5th level and the quality of the work is not always commensurate with the fee involved. Remember, you are out in the middle of a hostile wilderness, so travelers have to make do with what's available. Be glad this safe haven of a town even exists.

11. Mulligan's Brews: Mulligan's is a combination brewery and saloon. The bulk of the building is where most of the local beer in the county is brewed. This beer is then sold (via distributors) throughout Moorcroft, including places like the Downtowner, the Galley, and Brightmoor Drugstore.

The front of the building is the saloon area. Hard liquors are available but fairly expensive, since they have to be brought in from the outside world, while the local beer is cheap. Munchies such as peanuts, pretzels, nachos and breadsticks are free to patrons while burgers and a variety of other sandwiches are available at reasonable prices.

Mulligan's is more like a neighborhood pub or bar than a saloon out of the pre-Rifts Wild West. That said, the owners of Mulligan's try to provide some type of floor show and entertainment. This can be as simple as a singer, juggler, actor reciting Shakespeare, or sleight of hand artist to dance acts and magic illusions. Off to the side of the small stage is a broken Karaoke machine. It was broken during a barroom brawl and nobody has been able to fix it. The manager would like to get it fixed but the overwhelming vote of the regular clientele is to leave it broken. (Some of the locals are incredibly lousy singers.)

If there is a barroom brawl or disorderly conduct, it is likely to happen at Mulligan's. When this happens, the authorities are quick to swoop in and quiet things down. Jailing outsiders and dragging local drunks home.

12. The Trading Post: An open market with a number of picnic tables and a couple of huts (storage). This is where local tribes of Native Americans can set up wares to trade with the town locals. Items include jewelry, bows and arrows, spears, blankets, baskets, furs, leatherworks, dolls and toys, herbs, fresh nuts and berries, and sometimes Great Plains Buffalo and dinosaur meat and byproducts (teeth, claws, etc.), as well as magic fetishes and weapons. This is also where one might be able to hire men for work, hunting, scouting, as guides, etc.

13. The Galley Restaurant: The Galley is a restaurant with a nautical theme. Fishnets, anchors, and other naval artifacts decorate the Galley and give it a nautical ambiance. Fish dishes are the main food served. Although there is only one large lake (the Reservoir) near Moorcroft, there are a number of ponds, creeks, and streams nearby to provide an ample supply of different types of fish. Many of the locals who fish in these nearby ponds and streams trade their excess catch to the Galley for a good price.

What makes the Galley truly unique is that it is what's left of an ocean fishing vessel that was out in the Pacific! According to legend, half of the ship dropped out of the sky after a particularly nasty "storm" a few weeks after the Great Cataclysm struck. It popped right through a rare Rift in the middle of town! The ship's captain, cook and half of the crew survived and became part of the town and they turned the remains of the ship into their home and shop that eventually turned into the Galley restaurant.

14. Insta-Care Clinic: Moorcroft is too small to support a regular hospital even before the Great Cataclysm. Medical care for the community is provided by the Insta-Care Clinic. A Body Fixer, from a long line of country doctors in town, provides a wide selection of medical services. Doctor Robbins and his small staff (two nurses and two orderlies) are very good at what they do and treatment costs are inexpensive. Also, Insta-Care is willing to accept alternative forms of payment (including various services) or set up deferred payments. Furthermore, there are occasions when Insta-Care is willing to treat transient patients and trust them to pay their bills upon their return to Moorcroft.

15. Rocky Mountain Lithographing Co. Rocky Mountain prints handbills, wanted posters, posters, flyers, business cards, etc. When anyone in the county needs something printed up, they contact Rocky Mountain. Rocky Mountain's quoted prices are somewhat high but they offer various discounts and other incentives. Customers who are willing to pay their fees up front will usually receive a substantial rebate.

16. Brokerage House and Realty: This company was set up by a group of entrepreneurs as a means of stimulating economic growth in Moorcroft. For a reasonable fee (how much will depend upon the specific transaction), Brokerage will expedite business deals.

In addition to acting as a realtor and finding locations for various business concerns, Brokerage will also find backers and financial support. This especially holds true for wandering adventurers as Brokerage is far less conservative than the Moorcroft Bank. Also, Brokerage has a reciprocal working agreement with the Travel Management Agency to purchase equipment at lower rates than what they may be commonly sold for.

17. Simmons Textiles: This is a rather large business that makes rugs, wall covers, quilts, coats, cloaks, capes, ponchos, boots, mittens, tents, backpacks, and other goods from the hides of local wild animals,

as well as leather gloves, jackets, pouches, purses, bags, moccasins, and other clothing. The furs are supplied mainly by the many local Native American tribes, so there is no need for the company to have its own trappers. Whenever they can get them, the textile business weaves rugs and fabrics from wool and imported cotton. There are also number of skilled people on staff able to make, repairing and tailor clothes, bed sheets, drapes, and similar items.

18. Moorcroft Coal: This is another, comparatively large (for this town) business that mines, manages and trades the community's coal supply. The coal mine is becoming depleted so logs are encouraged for use in most of the town's fireplaces and wood-burning stoves, but coal is available and also used to power larger machines, engines and generators at the coal mine, the lumberyard and other businesses. Everyone gets a free allotment of coal to get them through the winter, but it is expected to be supplemented with firewood. Additional coal is available for purchase and trade, but can get expensive.

19. Moorcroft Oil and Petroleum Store: This is where refined oil, gasoline for vehicles and lamp oil are available for purchase. Only the lamp oil is inexpensive. Gasoline and oil is double the market price across North America. It also sells a variety of lanterns, Tiki torches and lamps, other oil burning lamps, heaters, portable stoves, and similar devices, at low prices.

20. Moorcroft Barbershop and Salon: Originally a barbershop just for men, the salon has expanded its operations for women as well. The shop/salon is divided into two sections, one for each gender. Some of the employees, barbers, hairdressers, manicurists, etc., only work with one gender while others service both. Every worker at the barbershop and the salon provide a full range of services for their customers, and do a nice job. Prices at the barbershop are inexpensive. Both the barbershop and the salon have become places where the local populace can go to get caught up with the latest gossip.

Streets running North-South:

N. Belle Fourche Ave.
S. Belle Fourche Ave.
N. Big Horn Ave.
S. Big Horn Ave.
N. Cheyenne Ave.
S. Gibbons St.
Green River Ave.
N. Little Horn Ave.
S. Little Horn Ave.
Lomac St.
Platte Ave.
N. Powder River Ave.
Riley Ave.
Sisson Ave.
N. Yellowstone Ave.

Streets running East-West:

E. Campbell St.
W. Campbell St.
E. Converse St.
W. Converse St.
W. Crook St.
W. Goshen St.
Johnson St.
Park St.
Sheridan St.
W. Weston St.

Streets running on a diagonal:

Country Lane
Platte St.
E. Railroad Ave.
W. Railroad Ave.

Holidays

The people of Moorcroft subscribe to the dictum of "Work hard, play hard!!" As such, they have instituted a few legal holidays throughout the year to give their populace the opportunity to have fun, let off steam, and strengthen their civic bonds. There are four official holidays along with four other "non-official" ones. They are:

New Year's Day is celebrated on January 1st. However, it has been modified as a combination of pre-Rifts New Year's Day and a secular Christmas. Although there are no events officially slated for this day, enough citizens traditionally show up to form their own parades to welcome the new year. The shops and public buildings are closed except for various dining areas where communal feasts (just slightly smaller than those during the Harvest Festival) are held for the populace of Moorcroft.

Some people will forgo a major feast in favor of several smaller ones. Since there are always a number of citizens who take this opportunity to prepare common meals (think of tailgate parties), it is not too difficult for most citizens to wander about and eat to their heart's content.

Furthermore, like pre-Rifts Christmas, New Year's Day in Moorcroft is a time for families and loved ones to re-unite and for giving presents to usher in the new year.

The Moorcroft Jubilee is held annually on the second Saturday of July. This holiday is akin to the American Independence Day (the Fourth of July) of pre-Rifts times. The Jubilee is a one-day event that celebrates Moorcroft's heritage (and its surviving the Cataclysm) with a chuck wagon breakfast, parade, barbecue, rodeo play day, and a street dance.

The Harvest Festival is somewhat akin to the Thanksgiving of pre-Rifts times. There are several crops that are grown locally and are reaped at various times late in the year. The first of these harvests traditionally occurs anywhere from late August to mid-September (depending on the weather conditions for that particular year).

When those crops are ripe, many volunteers will assist the farmers in harvesting them. After a portion of the crops are set aside in storage for the winter (the first of several harvests to do so), the remainder is prepared for feasts throughout the town. Although some citizens prefer more intimate dinners at their homes (just for their families and/or close friends), a city park is co-opted for a large-scale feast and celebration (much in the same manner as the original Thanksgiving feast of the Puritans).

Note: The harvests for the various crops range all the way up to late October. However, long ago, the leaders of Moorcroft decided to celebrate the initial harvest as being the best spacing of a holiday between the Jubilee (see above) and Halloween (see below).

Halloween. Another of Moorcroft's major holidays, **Halloween** is one of the few holidays that not only survived from before the Cataclysm but also remained basically unchanged. Every October 31, adults and children alike will don costumes. Although some children still go door-to-door trick or treating for candy, most go to the various fairs and block parties where they can bob for apples, visit "haunted" houses, and otherwise indulge themselves in traditional Halloween activities (but with adult supervision). Afterwards, the adults (also in costumes) will go to more mature-themed parties where they will have their own celebrations.

An interesting note is that many D-Bees, once they have been introduced to the concept of Halloween and have accepted that their human neighbors have not (necessarily) lost their collective minds, have themselves embraced the holiday and have often become an integral part of the various celebrations. In particular, D-Bees that physically resemble classical monsters from pre-Rifts times are in great demand.

Four non-official holidays occur every year when planetary forces will align to give Ley Lines and Nexus Points a brief (but significant) energy boost—the **Equinoxes** and the **Solstices**.

Due to the relative positions of the Sun and the Earth, the **Summer Solstice** is the longest day of the year, the **Winter Solstice** the shortest day, and the lengths of daytime and night are generally equal during the Equinoxes. Traditionally considered to be the beginning of the seasons, the Vernal Equinox (Spring) occurs in March on either the 19th, 20th,

or 21st; the Summer Solstice occurs in June on either the 20th, 21st, or 22nd; the Autumnal Equinox (Autumn) occurs in September on either the 22nd or 23rd; and the Winter Solstice occurs in December on either the 21st or 22nd.

In Moorcroft, many businesses close early on those days to allow citizens to prepare for possible events. Mages (of all types) are out in force to bask in and garner the ambient P.P.E. The town militia is mobilized in the advent of a Ley Line Storm or Dimensional Rift occurring, and Dr. Robbins tries to recruit anyone he can find with medical skills to assist him with the imminent population boom of Nexus Born newborns.

Town Government

The town government of Moorcroft is a five member town council consisting of a mayor and four councilpersons. Each council member receives a vote. However, the mayor's vote counts as 1½ votes. Thus, his vote is greater than any other single member of the council but he can be outvoted by two other council members.

The town council is elected in a general election every six years. Any adult citizen (age 18 for humans, and whatever is considered to be adulthood for other races) is allowed to vote and to run for office. However, citizens who are not native to Moorcroft must reside within the city (or its outlying territory) for at least three years.

Almost all major decisions affecting Moorcroft are determined by the town council. This includes negotiations with their neighbors (treaties, trade agreements, etc.), distribution of town resources, and common law ordinances. The mayor has a great deal of authority in dealing with day-to-day affairs and emergencies but can ultimately be overridden by the town council.

Any of the council members, including the mayor, can be impeached and removed from office in one of two methods: The rest of the council unanimously calls for his removal, or a citizens' petition signed by 20% of the current population calling for removal. If either of these events occur, it brings about a town meeting where the embattled mayor or councilperson, his supporters, and his opponents may discuss and argue whether or not the individual should retain his position or the impeachment be allowed to move forward.

Within a few days after the meeting, there is a new vote open to the entire citizenry of the town to determine if said mayor or councilperson keeps their job or is ousted. If the mayor is removed from office, there is a special election in two weeks to elect a successor. Until then, the senior councilperson temporarily assumes the position of mayor until the election. Except for the impeached person, any citizen may run for mayor in the special election, including current members of the town council.

If the outgoing individual was a councilperson, their post is either vacant until the special election or the mayor may appoint someone as a *temporary substitute*. **Note:** The impeached individual(s) are barred from running for public office for 10 years. Afterwards, they are permitted to run for office the same as any other citizen of Moorcroft, though their reputation may be ruined.

Law and Order

By and large, Moorcroft is a law-abiding town. Having survived the Two Hundred Years Dark Age and beyond, Moorcroft is one of the oldest communities to survive the Coming of the Rifts. Over the generations, they have learned to work together as a close-knit community who live and die as a unified group. Being so small, everyone knows everyone else, so it's hard to get away with much, and newcomers are few. The town council pretty much goes by common sense and doesn't burden their populace with a lot of petty laws. The citizens respond by generally obeying those laws that do exist. Usually, what little lawbreaking is done is minor things like petty theft, public intoxication, brawling, disturbing the peace, etc.

Enforcing the law is the task of *Sheriff Kimberly Welch*. Most of the time, Sheriff Welch and her three regular deputies are more than equal to the task. However, this is still Rifts Earth and stuff happens. Fortunately,

in addition to the four full-time officers, there is a **Sheriff's Auxiliary Group (SAG)**. SAG members are citizen volunteers who often accompany the officers on their patrols, providing useful backup and support. Thanks to SAG, there may be anywhere from 6-18 law enforcement officers in the Sheriff's department at any given time. If more lawmen are needed, the Sheriff can issue a call up for twice that number within a half an hour's notice.

Furthermore, Sheriff Welch is authorized with broad powers to deputize other citizens if deemed necessary. In a crisis, the Sheriff can muster a force of 40-80 volunteers plus the militia.

Moorcroft's judicial system is also simplistic and straightforward. All five members of the town council are authorized as Justices of the Peace. As such, each of them is allowed to perform weddings, issue various permits, and dispense justice. Unlike the town council where the mayor has somewhat superior status, all five of them are equal as magistrates.

Moorcroft does not have a sitting judicial system. Between the five justices, they work out a schedule so that one of them is available to act as a magistrate at any given time. On the occasions when no one is readily accessible, the sheriff or a deputy notifies one of the justices that they are needed at court. At the worst, it may take a day or two before someone is available to act as a judge.

Since most infractions are minor, only one of the magistrates is usually needed. However, when a more serious crime takes place, like murder, rape, cattle rustling, horse theft, etc., two or more of the judges may try the case together.

Punishment. Moorcroft being so isolated from the rest of civilization, has developed something of a frontier mentality and a pragmatic attitude. As such, they can not afford to waste time, manpower, and resources in the long-term incarceration of malefactors. Instead, the Moorcroft government opts for a policy favoring restoration and restitution. Most lawbreakers are only jailed until they stand trial. Those convicted of a minor crime are generally subject to fines which go toward the upkeep and welfare of the town, compensating the victim(s) fairly, and community service. Those convicted of a major crime are either banished or executed depending upon the severity of the offense. Although the system may be a bit draconian, Moorcroft is more concerned with protecting their law-abiding citizens than with the rights of those who threaten and wrong them.

Moorcroft defendants are given three fundamental rights: One, given that there may be a less than cordial history between the judge and the defendant, on cases that are tried by one magistrate, the defendant may veto the slated judge and request a different one. This may only be done once, and the defendant is then stuck with the replacement judge assigned to the case. This right is not applicable for cases that are tried by more than one magistrate since, it is believed, at least one of the judges acting as jurists will be fair and impartial and be able to counteract the one who is not.

Two, due to their common sense attitude, there are no full-time trial lawyers in Moorcroft. Instead, the accused may either defend himself or he may request that a citizen of Moorcroft act as his advocate. This advocacy has to be voluntary as neither the accused nor the authorities can force someone to serve as a lawyer/advocate for another person. For this specific purpose, due to their sterling reputation, visiting Cyber-Knights are considered honorary Moorcroft citizens and, as such, are eligible to act as advocates.

Three, if convicted, the defendant may appeal his case. Appeals are heard by the entire panel of all five judges. The judges may uphold or reverse the earlier verdict, or re-try the entire case. Ultimately, their decision is final.

The Moorcroft Militia

Other than the Sheriff's department and its auxiliaries (see Law and Order, above), the town of Moorcroft does not have a standing army. Instead, they have a *volunteer militia*. Commanded by the Cyber-Knight, Sir Antranek, the militia is comprised of citizen-soldiers (and mages)

who spend a few days every month in maneuvers and training to become a functional military unit.

All militia members are given some kind of rank starting with private, so if they are mobilized, their chain of command is already established. When fully mustered, fighters (including mages) and support staff of the militia numbers around 300. However, as a large portion of these volunteers are practitioners of magic, they are much more formidable than their sheer numbers suggest. Furthermore, over the years, Moorcroft has been slowly stockpiling magic Fetish weapons created by the local Shamans so that they now boast a very impressive magical arsenal as well as a decent conventional armory of S.D.C. and M.D. weapons.

The militia can be mustered and mobilized by the mayor or by the town council. However, if mobilized by the mayor on his own authority alone, the militia is only obligated to remain mustered for 10 days before standing down. If the militia is mobilized by the town council, the mustering period can be as much as 40 days, and in both cases, the militia may be required to defend the town or engage a potential enemy away from the town. In either case, after the specified period, any member of the militia may muster out and go home without being considered as AWOL or face any other official form of reprisal. On the other hand, if the crisis is still ongoing, militiamen may find it impossible to leave without rendering their teammates vulnerable. Most stay mobilized until the danger passes. Of course, as a small, close-knit community, every citizen may join a fight that involves protecting their homes and family. And remember, the local Native American and Psi-Stalker tribes may also join the fight against a powerful enemy or large combat force.

Notable People of Moorcroft

Doctor Robbins

Doctor Salvatore “Doc Sal” Robbins is one of the most respected and beloved individuals in the town of Moorcroft. He is a Nexus Born who comes from a long family of country doctors who cares for the residents. He is trained in “modern” medicine but also possesses psionic healing abilities and he is familiar with holistic medicine. The psychic abilities manifested at an early age and Sal went to work as an assistant for his father and mother, the current town doctors. Although Sal managed to help heal people with his psychic talents, he was brought up to care about people and learned the trade from his parents. He has no “official” medical degree, but is a skilled Body Fixer and surgeon. He has been the town’s physician for years now and is known and loved by almost everyone. He considers himself a man of science, so he has never learned healing magic from the Shamans, but is happy to let them help care for the sick and injured. He is training his daughter and nephew to become the next generation of town doctors. His daughter, Clare, also possesses psychic healing abilities, but his nephew, Jonathan, does not. Both are compassionate, smart and eager to learn.

Having been an integral member of the community for so long, Dr. Robbins felt that he could contribute even more to the betterment of Moorcroft by serving as a member of the town council. He was elected by a grateful citizenry and has been serving in that office ever since. Although officially, Moorcroft does not have an Board of Health, any concerns regarding diseases or any other health or medical problems that may affect Moorcroft are brought to Doctor Robbins.

Name: Salvatore Robbins.

Also Known as: “Doctor Sal,” “Doc Sal” and just “Doc.” Even most of his friends call him “Doc.”

Race: Human – Nexus Born, Body Fixer.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Attributes: I.Q. 15, M.E. 11, M.A. 16, P.S. 11, P.P. 12, P.E. 15, P.B. 11, Spd 10.

Hit Points: 29. **S.D.C.:** 23.

Height: 5 feet, 10 inches (1.8 m). **Weight:** 160 lbs (72 kg).

Disposition: Dr. Robbins is a bit gruff sometimes but has the proverbial “Heart of Gold.” He deeply cares about his patients and will go to great lengths to ensure their good health.

Description: A pleasant-looking, 49 year old man with a shock of gray in his full head of bushy hair. Dr. Robbins is usually dressed in rumpled clothes and on call 24/7.

Experience Level: 8th level Body Fixer (see **Rifts® Ultimate Edition RPG**, pages 86-88).

Special O.C.C. Abilities: See **Rifts® Ultimate Edition RPG**, page 87. Familiarity with D-Bees, Disease Diagnostic Specialist. Also see Psionics, below.

Notable Skills: Animal Husbandry 70%, Biology 95%, Botany 63%, Brewing: Medicinal 80/85%, Chemistry 85%, Cryptography 60%, Languages: American 98% and Faerie Speak 92%, Literate in American 98%, Lore: D-Bees 85%, Math (Basic 95%, Advanced 80%), Medical Doctor 98%, Pathology 98%, Pilot Automobile 75%, Public Speaking 80%, Research 62%, Sensory Equipment (medical equipment 85%, other 70%), Sewing 85%, Wilderness Survival 80%, and Xenology 80%.

Weapon Proficiencies: W.P. Knife (+4 to strike, +3 to parry or throw) and W.P. Shotgun (+3 to strike).

Attacks per Melee: No formal Hand to Hand training, three attacks per melee or five non-combat actions.

Bonuses: +2 on Perception Rolls (+4 on those involving drugs/chemicals, poison, or other medical related matters), +1 to dodge, +3 to save vs disease and insanity, +2 to save vs poison, drugs, and Horror Factor.

Magic: None. **P.P.E.:** 14.

Psionics: Considered a Major Psychic, he needs a 12 or better to save vs psionics and possesses the following psionic abilities: Bio-Regeneration (self; 6), Exorcism (10), Healing Touch (6), Increased Healing (10), Meditation (0), Mind Block (4), Psychic Diagnosis (4), Psychic Surgery (14), Resist Fatigue (4), Stop Bleeding (4). **I.S.P.:** 66.

Notable Equipment: Light M.D.C. body armor (24 M.D.C.), Wilk’s-Remi 104 Derringer and two E-Clips, 12 gauge shotgun and two extra magazines (7 round feed), Vibro-Knife (1D6 M.D.C.), two scalpels (1D4 S.D.C. damage), one Wilk’s Laser Scalpel, four surgical gowns, 244 pairs of disposable surgical gloves, two pairs of reusable surgical gloves, surgical kit, medical kit, IRMSS/Internal Robot Micro-Surgeon System, RMK/Robot Medical Kit, hand-held computer, handheld blood pressure machine (computerized), thermometer, six unbreakable vials, portable compu-drug dispenser, portable laboratory, backpack, medical satchel, flashlight, pen flashlight, brimmed-hat, hooded cape, canteen, pair of sunglasses, air filter, pocket notepad and 2 pens, traveling gear for making house calls, some personal items, and 18 days worth of food and water rations.

Vehicle: MI-3000 Firefly Hovercycle with 49 M.D.C. remaining.

Money: 6,000 in credits and 190,000 credits worth of magic fetishes, magic weapons, and other odds and ends he has accepted in trade over the many years, but has no real use for himself.

Ethan the Adventurer

Ethan Kulavich was born and raised in Moorcroft. As a Nexus Born, he soon discovered he had an affinity toward magic and psionics that made him destined to be a *Mystic*. After mastering his craft, Ethan joined a group of traveling adventurers to see the world and gain practical experience. When he returned several years later, Ethan had greatly changed. Gone was the brash, cocky young Mystic who was ready to take on the world, replaced by a more cautious and introspective person who was far less willing to take a risk.

Throughout the town, there is a fair amount of speculation about what might have happened to change Ethan. The most common theories are that either he was taken prisoner at some point and forced to endure hardship and torture, or that Ethan survived a massacre where most of his friends and teammates were killed. Which of these theories (if either) is correct, is a matter of conjecture and gossip. Only Ethan knows the truth and he never speaks of his days as an adventurer.

Ethan is usually polite and considerate, but if the conversation turns to his days as an adventurer, or if he sees or hears something that reminds him of past unpleasantness, he is known to just get up and walk away without a word or a backward glance.

As far as Ethan is concerned, Moorcroft is and always has been a safe haven in an otherwise harsh and dangerous world. To preserve Moorcroft as the refuge it has always been, Ethan has run for town council and has won a seat. His conservatism (and some might say, xenophobia) and desire to have Moorcroft remain isolated has acted as a counterbalance against a couple of other members of the town council who would like to see the town become more involved with the world around them. Ethan fights such ideas with a passion.

Name: Ethan Kulavich.

Race: Human – Nexus Born.

Alignment: Principled.

Attributes: I.Q. 12, M.E. 15, M.A. 10, P.S. 15, P.P. 13, P.E. 19, P.B. 15, Spd 14.

Hit Points: 37. **S.D.C.:** 21.

Height: 6 feet, 1 inch (1.8 m). **Weight:** 190 lbs (85.5 kg).

Disposition: Originally very cocky and daring, Ethan has become very cautious, conservative and a bit paranoid. He is caring, just and always tries to do the right thing, even when he has misgivings about it. Something of a worrywart, he is especially tight-lipped around outsiders and always suspicious of their motives and intentions, especially mercenaries and adventurers.

Description: Slightly taller than average, slender, muscular, and clean-cut man with sandy hair and rugged good looks.

Experience Level: 6th level Mystic (see **Rifts® Ultimate Edition**, pages 118-120, for more details).

Notable Skills: Native Language: American 97%, Languages: Dragonese, Faerie, and Spanish, all at 74%, Basic Math 70%, Biology 55%, Dance 65%, Disguise 55%, Hand to Hand: Expert, Horsemanship: General 68%/48%, Land Navigation 64%, Lore: American Indians, D-Bees, Faeries, and Magic, all at 65%, Philosophy 70%, Play Musical Instrument: Trumpet 60%, Sensory Equipment 45%, Wilderness Survival 70%.

Weapon Proficiencies: Handguns, Energy Pistol (+2 to strike with either).

Attacks per Melee: Five.

Bonuses: +2 to Perception Rolls (+4 on ley lines), +1 on initiative, +2 to strike, +3 to parry & dodge, +3 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +3 to pull punch, karate kick attack does 2D6, body flip/throw does 1D6. +4 to save vs magic, psionic attacks, possession, and Horror Factor, +2 to save vs poison, insanity and mind control, and +8% vs coma/death.

Magic: Knows the following magic spells at +2 to Spell Strength: Befuddle (6), Blinding Flash (1), Breathe Without Air (5), Carpet of Adhesion (10), Cleanse (6), Climb (3), Cloud of Smoke (2), Cure Minor Disorders (10), Fingers of the Wind (5), Fuel Flame (5), Heavy Breathing (5), Lantern Light (1), Light Healing (6), Manipulate Objects (2+), Turn Dead (6), Thunderclap (4), and Trance (10). **P.P.E.:** 87.

Psionics: Sense Supernatural Evil 65%, Opening Self to the Supernatural 65%, and the following Psionic abilities: Mind Bolt (varies), Clairvoyance (4), Commune with Spirits (6), Exorcism (10), Increased Healing (10), Mask P.P.E. (4), Meditation (0), Psychic Diagnosis (4), Psychic Surgery (14), Sixth Sense (2), Suppress Fear (8), and Telepathy (4). Considered a major psychic and needs a 12 or better to save vs psionic attacks. **I.S.P.:** 59.

Notable Equipment: Homemade M.D.C. armor (30 M.D.C.), .38 revolver & 3 ammo clips, Wilk's 320 laser pistol & 1 E-Clip (10 shots), knapsack, backpack, 2 small sacks, 1 large sack, 6 wooden stakes & a mallet, small silver cross, canteen, binoculars, tinted glasses, air filter and gas mask, guitar, 2 hooded cloaks, and some personal items. **Money:** 5,000 in credits and 70,000 credits worth of Black Market goods.

Mayor Pendragon

The following is Mayor Pendragon's officially sanctioned biography: *"A young man named Tolan discovered that he had magical talents and began his wandering adventurer career as a Ley Line Walker. One of Tolan's early comrades was a dragon. This dragon was such a good friend to Tolan that he changed his name to Pendragon as a means of honoring his friend."*

During his adventuring career, Pendragon did many noble deeds and traveled to many places. Eventually, he came upon the town of Moorcroft and fell in love with it. Deciding to forsake adventuring and his roaming ways, Pendragon settled down in Moorcroft. He soon became one of the pillars of the community. Pendragon ultimately realized that, with his background and experience, he was capable of improving the lives of the people of Moorcroft and successfully ran for mayor. He is now engaged in doing everything he can to better and protect the town of Moorcroft and its citizens."

Now, here is the truth behind Pendragon's story:

Eugene Tolan did indeed become a wandering Ley Line Walker and one of his early comrades was a dragon. However, the dragon barely noticed Eugene, whose name change to Pendragon was an attempt to flatter and suck up to the dragon.

Ultimately, Eugene's career as an adventurer was neither more or less than that of many who travel throughout Rifts Earth. In his adventuring days, Eugene did visit many places (often one step ahead of a posse!), gaining valuable experience. However, true greatness has always eluded him.

When Eugene discovered the town of Moorcroft, he looked upon it as a place where he could hide from his creditors and enemies. He ran for mayor not for the benefit of the town, but because he thought (correctly) that it would give him status and improve his position. Eugene's mayoral campaign was based on making all sorts of promises to a myriad of people that if elected, he would make the town better and safer. These were promises that he had never intended to keep. The town is in such a good state that there is really not much that needs to be done to make it better, especially if it is to be kept secret from the civilized world.

However, since Pendragon's election to mayor, a change has come over him. In trying to maintain his cover as a caring individual, Pendragon has had to go through the motions of dealing with the problems of the town. In doing so, he has, for the first time in his life, begun to care about people other than himself. He has started to become involved in the lives of his constituents and actually cares about them and the community! In a classic case of a con artist getting caught up in his own scam, Mayor Pendragon now finds himself in the position of not only trying to keep all of his campaign promises, but genuinely wanting to do so.

Ironically, now that Mayor Pendragon is making a sincere effort to do the right thing, he could receive a lot of assistance from the Moorcroft citizenry if he would only ask for their help. Pendragon is now ashamed of his checkered past and fears what his new friends and constituents might think of him if they were ever revealed; secrets he keeps to himself. Not used to truly working with others or asking for help, he is a bit cagey and hesitant to show weakness or lack of knowledge, for fear people would think less of him. If he can get over this, Pendragon might actually become a strong leader. He is already well liked and accepted by the townsfolk. If given enough time, Moorcroft can become the home he

never realized he was looking for. Should the town come under attack, Mayor Pendragon will do everything he can to protect and defend it.

Mayor Pendragon – Ley Line Walker

Real Name: Eugene Tolan.

Nicknames/Aliases: He prefers to go simply by the name “Pendragon” and most people don’t even know his first name is Eugene. Elsewhere, like the Pecos Empire and Arzno, he is known as “Two-Gun Tully,” “Tully,” “Gene the Sorcerer,” and “Lan the Bandit.”

Race: Human.

Alignment: Unprincipled (was Anarchist during his adventuring days), but on the verge of becoming Scrupulous.

Attributes: I.Q. 19, M.E. 18, M.A. 17, P.S. 13, P.P. 13, P.E. 13, P.B. 15, Spd 10.

Hit Points: 36. **S.D.C.:** 21.

Height: 5 feet, 11 inches (1.8 m). **Weight:** 168 lbs (75.6 kg).

Disposition: Pendragon has hid his fears behind a facade of hail-fellow-well-met for so many years, it has become a conditioned response. However, behind the gregarious mask, he is still insecure about failing and being found out as a fraud.

Description: When he is not wearing the traditional Line Walker garb, Pendragon tends to dress fairly formally (in keeping with his position as the mayor).

Occupation: Mayor of Moorcroft. A former adventurer, and unknown to anybody in town, a mercenary and bandit who ran with various gangs in the Pecos Empire.

Experience Level: 7th level Ley Line Walker and something of desperado and gambler in the southwest.

Skills of Note: Languages: American 98% and Spanish 80%, Literacy: American 85%, Astronomy & Navigation 65%, Athletics (General), Biology 65%, Botany 60%, Climbing 70%/60%, Computer Operation 68%, Disguise 50%, First Aid 71%, Gambling 70%, Hand to Hand: Expert, Land Navigation 61%, Law (General) 65%, Lore: American Indians 77%, Cattle & Animals 98%, Demons & Monsters 75%, Magic 74%, Psychics & Psionics, all at 84%, Math: Basic 80%, Research 67%, Wilderness Survival 65%.

Weapon Skills: W.P. Knife (+2 to strike, parry, or throw), W.P. Axe (+2 to strike or parry, +1 to throw), W.P. Energy Pistol (+2 to strike).

Ley Line Walker O.C.C. Abilities: 1. Sense Ley Line & Magic Energy (Sense Ley Line 50%, Sense Ley Line Nexus 60%), 2. Read Ley Line, 3. Ley Line Transmission, 4. Ley Line Phasing, 5. Ley Line Walking, 6. Ley Line Rejuvenation, 7. Ley Line Observation Ball, 8. Affinity with Rift & Ley Line Magic, 9. Ley Line Force Field (30 S.D.C.) (see **Rifts® Ultimate Edition RPG**, pages 113-116, for more details about Ley Line Walkers). Also Magic, below.

Attacks per Melee: Five by combat or spells.

Bonuses: +2 to strike, +4 to parry or dodge, +3 to pull punch or roll with punch, fall, or impact, +2 to disarm, Karate Kick (2D6 damage), Karate Punch (2D4 damage), +4 on Perception Rolls (+6 when on a ley line), +4 to save vs Horror Factor, +3 to save vs curses, +2 to save vs psionics, insanity, possession, or mind control, +1 to save vs magic.

Magic: Spells include: Ballistic Fire (25), Befuddle (6), Blind (6), Blinding Flash (1), Breathe Without Air (5), Calling (8), Climb (3), Cloud of Smoke (2), Concealment (6), Energy Field (10), Fear (5), Fuel Flame (5), Globe of Silence (20), Heavy Breathing (5), Invisibility: Simple (6), Lifeblast (15), Mask of Deceit (15), Metamorphosis: Animal (25), See the Invisible (4), Superhuman Endurance (12), Superhuman Speed (10), Turn Dead (6). All of these are at +3 Spell Strength. **P.P.E.:** 163.

Psionics: None.

Armor: His Ley Line Walker costume has 50 M.D.C.

Note: A wanted man in parts of the Southwest and Mexico.



Brokely, Cyber-Squire

Brokely (pronounced BRO-KLEE) is a reptilian D-Bee who works as a sort of a handyman, taking odd jobs, often those that no one else wants to deal with. Brokely is definitely one of the most unique individuals in Moorcroft. In addition to being the only lizard man in town, there are two eccentricities that make him unusual.

First, he claims to be a Cyber-Knight in training. This is not the case, he is actually a Vagabond. However, ever since he was rescued from slavery by a Cyber-Knight, he has decided to join their ranks. When Sir Antranek first learned of this, he tried to dissuade Brokely. After repeatedly trying to reason with the man didn’t work, he tried a very stern warning to stop claiming he was a Knight in training. Both measures failed, and Sir Antranek realized that Brokely would continue to proclaim himself as a Cyber-Knight in training. The Knight was angry and told Brokely he was a liar and a fraud, but the D-Bee continued. Then Sir Antranek noticed something. Brokely was continually helping people, behaved in a helpful and noble manner (except for one other eccentricity), and openly followed the tenants of the Cyber-Knights. In short, Brokely was a Cyber-Knight at heart. He decided to encourage the D-Bee in his delusion, finally convincing Brokely that it was wrong to claim himself a full-fledged Cyber-Knight, because he was a Knight in training and Cyber-Knights shouldn’t lie. Instead, he declared Brokely to be a Cyber-Squire, a title the kindhearted D-Bee has clung to proudly, because in his mind, it is “official” and everyone knows it! Since then, this has allowed Sir Antranek to help influence and guide Brokely’s actions to behave in a Knightly manner. Well, as much as is possible for Brokely.

Brokely accepts almost any honest job that he is offered. He works for food or a place to sleep. In fact, he prefers payment that way. Technically, Brokely is homeless. He lives on the street in any shed, hut or barn anyone gives him permission to spend the night or any makeshift shelter he can scrounge up. He does not need money for rent, and his clothes are good enough, until they fall right off his back, so all he needs is food to get by. Everyone in Moorcroft knows about this, and most like the fel-

low, so they take turns giving him a place to sleep and having food to pay him for his handyman work.

Occasionally, someone – usually a transient or visitor in town – does not have food and offers to pay in credits. When this happens, Brokely sighs in resignation and accepts the money as payment. After all, to refuse would insult the client and this is not the Way of the Cyber-Squire. However, Brokely much prefers food, especially if his client turns his back and pretends to let him steal it. It is a game that everybody in town knows and goes along with.

That is Brokely's second eccentricity, he likes to think of himself as a stealthy thief, as well as a Cyber-Knight ... er, "Cyber-Squire." But he only steals food. Brokely is happy to obtain food for an honest day's work, and he will accept food as gifts and often shares things like a bag of apples or pears with children and others in need, but he loves to steal food. The food is then shared with many of Brokely's friends on the street, children and other needy people. You guessed it, Brokely considers himself to be a Robin Hood-type who steals from the well-to-do and feeds the poor. In this, he is only partially correct. Brokely is not truly a thief and he is so bad at stealing that by now almost everyone in Moorcroft knows about Brokely's "thieving ways" and many people humor the lizard man by making fanfare out of leaving food out in front of him and saying something like, "I sure hope nobody takes this food when I'm not looking." Locals and friendly visitors often leave food somewhere Brokely is sure to find it or they will make a convenient departure and leave their meal unguarded and ripe for the taking. Brokely reconciles his stealing as "a noble deed" (feeding the poor) and still within the Cyber-Squire code of honor.

Only food is considered to be fair game for the taking. If someone ever suggested that Brokely stole cash or an object to pawn for cash, even to buy food, the Cyber-Squire would be outraged. As far as he is concerned, stealing (other than food for the poor, of course) is morally wrong! It should be noted that the Cyber-Squire NEVER takes food from anyone who is poor, and he always watches out for children, the elderly, and, well, everyone in Moorcroft. He once even dove on top of a toddler to shield her from a cattle stampede. It was this action that finally convinced Sir Antranek to dub Brokely a Cyber-Squire.

Brokely, the Lyvorrk Cyber-Squire

Name: Brokely.

Also Known As: "Will Work for Food Brokely" and "Cyber-Squire Brokely."

Race: Lyvorrk, reptilian D-Bee. (See **Rifts® World Book 30: D-Bees of North America** about Lyvorrk and 85 other D-Bees.)

Alignment: Unprincipled.

Attributes: I.Q. 12, M.E. 9, M.A. 12, P.S. 14 (Augmented), P.P. 16, P.E. 17, P.B. 12, Spd 13.

Hit Points: 34. **S.D.C.:** 31.

Height: 5 feet, 1 inch (1.5 m). **Weight:** 120 pounds (54 kg).

Description: He is a muscular, strong reptilian humanoid, and probably a young man for his species. When cleaned up he strikes a handsome figure for a lizard man. Unfortunately, Brokely has no sense of style or fashion, and wears dirty, tattered clothes until they barely stay on, which makes him look disheveled, dirty and unwholesome, especially to those who don't know him. The locals are always trying to get him to wash up and wear clean, untattered clothes. "Why? This shirt is my favorite, and my knees aren't even completely through my pants."

Disposition: Brokely is not your typical Lyvorrk. He has no secret agenda nor desire for power or wealth. Quite the opposite. He is honest, sincere and brave; quick to stand up for the innocent and help those in need, even if it's rescuing a cat from a tree. Brokely is no dummy, but he is rather childlike and a bit simple-minded. This is how he was when he stumbled into town, so nobody knows if this is the way he has always been or whether something happened to make him like this.

Brokely is not afraid of hard work and always does a good job at whatever task he is asked to accomplish. However, he only works enough to feed himself or to help others less fortunate. When he is not working for food or a warm place to sleep in the winter (he usually sleeps outdoors in the warm months), the Cyber-Squire is playing with children, talking to them about right and wrong, honoring their parents, the virtues of honesty, etc., or just wandering around, lending a hand to anyone who needs it, and keeping his eye out for trouble. He is a Cyber-Squire and Cyber-Knight in training, after all. The D-Bee considers Moorcroft his home and all its inhabitants as his friends and under his protection.

Insanities: All Lyvorrk are crazy to some degree. Hence Brokely's obsession with being brave, kind and heroic, and becoming a Cyber-Knight. He also likes to steal food from those who have plenty and giving it others (he can't help himself), and dresses in rags and filthy clothing he rarely changes.

Experience Level: 5th level Vagabond.

Special Vagabond O.C.C. Abilities: See **Rifts® Ultimate Edition**, page 97; 1. Eyeball a Person 68%, 2. O.C.C. Bonuses (already figured in). See **Rifts® World Book 30: D-Bees of North America** for more about Lyvorrk and their special abilities.

Skills of Note: Astronomy & Navigation 55%, Barter 62%, Begging 52%, Cook 70%, Fishing 75% (professional quality), General Repair & Maintenance 60%, Hand to Hand: Basic, Horsemanship: General 61%/41%, I.D. Undercover Agent 56%, Jury-Rig 45%, Languages: Dragonese/Elven 88%, American, and Techno-Can, 85% each, Pilot: Motorcycle 88%, Play Musical Instrument: Harmonica 70%, Radio: Basic 70%, and Streetwise 46%.

Weapon Proficiencies: W.P. Staff (+2 to strike or parry, +1 to throw), W.P. Shotgun (+2 to strike), and W.P. Energy Pistol.

Attacks per Melee: Five.

Bonuses: +2 to strike, +3 to parry/dodge, +2 to pull punch, +2 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +1 to disarm, kick attack (does 1D8 damage).

Magic: None. **P.P.E.:** 7.

Psionics: None. At least none that he seems to ever use. In reality, Brokely possesses all the usual, psionic abilities of the Lyvorrk: Death Trance (1), Mind Block (4), Nightvision (4), Resist Fatigue (4), Resist Hunger (2), Resist Thirst (6) and Psionic Empathy with Reptiles (special; snakes, reptiles and even dinosaurs never hunt or bite him). He uses them only when he needs to. **I.S.P.:** 59. Considered to be a Major Psychic.

Vehicle: None. He walks everywhere, but likes horses and knows how to ride.

Notable Equipment: None; only what he has on his back, including a silver-plated dagger and matching silver-plated short sword, because every Cyber-Knight needs a sword. Most people don't even know he has the sword because he keeps it wrapped up in rags and stuffed in his large duffle bag.

Money: At any time Brokely may have 6D6x10 credits. However, he never keep more than that amount (more or less). On the rare occasions that he manages to acquire more than that, he buys food to give away to others or he lends or gives it away to friends and people he knows whom he feels are in financial trouble, hunger or in need.

Moyna Littlefeather

Moyna Littlefeather's early life was a mixture of two worlds. A Nexus Born in Moorcroft, she spent her early childhood there with her mother while her father, a Shoshone warrior, was away at war. When her father returned, she and her mother went to live with him and his people.

After several years with the Shoshone, Moyna's father was killed in battle and she and her mother returned to Moorcroft. However, since Moyna had shown she had potential to become a shaman, it was agreed she would return to the tribe and study the ways of the shaman. For many years, Moyna divided her time between living in Moorcroft and living

with the Shoshone, and eventually became a shaman. Ultimately, Moyna decided to remain in Moorcroft to take care of her ailing mother.

When the Shoshone tribal chiefs learned that Moyna would be going to live in Moorcroft, they asked her to act as an agent to help represent them with the Moorcroft town council. Moyna agreed and has acted on their behalf ever since. She was recently elected to the town council to serve all the people of Moorcroft. This has made her a powerful advocate for the townsfolk and Native Americans, particularly her Shoshone tribe. Despite her split allegiance, Moyna tries to be fair and impartial.

Moyna, Elemental Shaman

Name: Moyna Littlefeather.

Race: Human.

Alignment: Anarchist.

Attributes: I.Q. 18, M.E. 7, M.A. 12, P.S. 13, P.P. 12, P.E. 14, P.B. 15, Spd 21.

Hit Points: 45. **S.D.C.:** 20.

Height: 5 feet, 10 inches (1.5 m). **Weight:** 124 lbs (56 kg).

Disposition: When she was young, as someone who had roots in two different cultures but was not truly part of either, Moyna sometimes had a difficult time fitting in. Although age and maturity have brought her a more tolerant perspective, she is still quick to take offense at the term “Half-Breed” or any actions of prejudice against Native Americans. She is distrustful of outsiders.

Description: A grey-eyed, dark-haired woman of mixed (Caucasian & Native American) heritage. Moyna is usually dressed in Native American garb.

Experience Level: 7th level Elemental Shaman (Fire).

Skills: Basic Math 89%, Concealment 48%, Cook 69%, Dance 64%, Detect Concealment 53%, Hand to Hand: Basic. Horsemanship: Exotic Animals 64%/54%, Languages: American and Shoshone 98%, Dragonese/Elven and Faerie Speak 69%, Literacy: American 74%, Lore: Demons & Monsters 64%, Preserve Food 74%, Track & Trap Animals 44%/54%, and Wilderness Survival 49%.

Weapon Proficiencies: Spear (+3 to strike or parry, +2 to throw), and Targeting (+3 to strike).

Special O.C.C. Abilities: 1. Elemental Resistance and Special Totem Abilities (**Rifts® Spirit West**, page 66): Sense forest fires 88%, sense temperatures and temperature changes 65%, recognize/identify the nature of any fire 65%, sense and recognize fire hazards 78%. 2. Sense, Summon, and Speak to Elemental Spirits. 3. Magic Spell Casting Abilities (see below). 4. O.C.C. Bonuses (see below).

Attacks per Melee: Four.

Bonuses: +1 on initiative, +1 to strike and disarm, +2 to damage, +2 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +2 to pull punch, kick attack (1D8 damage), Critical strike on a 19-20, +1 to save vs poison, drugs, and disease, +2 vs magic, +3 save vs Horror Factor, and +4 to save vs possession.

Magic: **Elemental Spells:** Blinding Flash (1), Cloud of Ash (5), Cloud of Smoke (2), Dancing Fires (35), Darkness (8), Fiery Touch (5), Fire Globe (20), Fire Gout (10), Flame Lick (7), Globe of Daylight (2), Impervious to Fire (5), Mini-Fireballs (20), Nightvision (4), Spontaneous Combustion (5), Tongue of Flame (6), Wall of Flame (15).

Shamantic Magic: Animal Speech (5), Animate Tree (25), Call Totem Animal (25), Create Arrows (10/25), Dowsing (6), Ears of the Wolf (10), Magic Stick (20), Nose of the Wolf (6), Spirit Paint (10/20), Spirit Quest (5), Thornwall (10), and Totem Gift (12).

P.P.E: 133.

Psionics: None.

Sir Antranek

Sir Antranek (pronounced ANT-RAH-NECK) the Cyber-Knight is the commander of the Moorcroft city militia and a respected member of the town council. He is a rarity in several respects. Sir Antranek beat the odds and is the first *Vanguard Brawler* who is known to have become a Cyber-Knight (95% of Cyber-Knights are either human or from a handful of other races). But then Antranek seems to have managed to beat the odds for most of his life.

Vanguard Brawlers are generally considered to be an evil race (94% of all Brawlers are either Anarchist or evil). Antranek was no different. He ran with a gang of troublemakers and seemed content to become a petty criminal. This all changed when an attempt to take over someone else's turf went horribly wrong. Antranek's crew was ambushed and he was seriously wounded. He would have been killed had he not been rescued by *Sir Arcturus Garrick*, a Cyber-Knight who happened to be passing by. Sir Arcturus remained at Antranek's side until he was nursed back to health. When he had healed, the Brawler showed his gratitude by joining the Cyber-Knight on various noble quests.

In time, Antranek realized that there could be a greater purpose for him than just throwing his life away as a criminal and street thug. The longer he remained with Sir Arcturus, the more he aided the Cyber-Knight, and the greater his desire to better himself by emulating his mentor.

Though Sir Arcturus had some misgivings, he took a chance and sponsored Antranek to become a Cyber-Knight. To the surprise of many, the Vanguard Brawler responded to the challenge with flying colors, succeeding in his training and eventually joining the ranks of the Cyber-Knights. After undergoing a few quests to gain valuable experience, Sir Antranek was entrusted by Lord Coake with a special mission – go to Moorcroft and establish himself there as its resident Cyber-Knight.

It is common knowledge to the people living in the region that the *Big Horn Medicine Wheel* (to the northwest of Moorcroft) is a place of supernatural activity, and some say a portal for demons and monsters. But Native Americans and most locals insist it is place of positive energy with magic that serves the good of humanity. With an ever increasing amount of rumors about the Kingdom of Monsters in Calgary, Lord Coake decided he wanted to keep an eye on this “good” place of magic. Furthermore, Moorcroft serves as a good place for Cyber-Knights and heroes to rest and resupply on their way to and from Calgary. Having Sir Antranek there as a permanent fixture enabled the Cyber-Knights to keep the town secure and safe for the inhabitants and visiting Knights, as well as keep an eye on the Big Horn Medicine Wheel. Even before the advent of the Minion War, Lord Coake saw the town as a strategic resource. If the unthinkable should occur and monstrous D-Bees and demons were to come down from the North, then the nearest sizable permanent settlement, Moorcroft, would be a natural rallying point for assembling and organizing a defensive position. To that end, Sir Antranek has been gearing up for what he feels will be the inevitable demon invasion, by preparing the town for the battle of its life. Much of Sir Antranek's time is spent in training his militia people in small unit tactics to making them more effective fighters and spell casters, both individually and as a unit. It is both his and Lord Coake's hope that Moorcroft can remain a *secret outpost*, but with the coming of the Minion War and news of how powerful Calgary, the Kingdom of Monsters, has become, the fate of Moorcroft could be in jeopardy.

Sir Antranek, Cyber-Knight

Race: Vanguard Brawler.

Alignment: Aberrant, evil, cold and calculating, but honorable and a man of his word. Much to his chagrin, Sir Antranek has come to care about the people of Moorcroft.

Attributes: I.Q. 14, M.E. 7, M.A. 16, P.S. 21 (Robotic), P.P. 14, P.E. 20, P.B. 8, Spd 15.

M.D.C.: 64.

Height: 6 feet, 5 inches (2 m). **Weight:** 256 lbs (115.2 kg).

Disposition: Like most Vanguard Brawlers, Sir Antranek is a straight-talking, to the point fellow who tends to see things in terms of black and white. Sir Antranek is a hard-liner capable of making the decisions. As a magistrate/judge, he is far and away the toughest and least merciful. He has a “don’t do the crime if you can’t do the time” outlook that most defendants fear. Every wrongdoer tries to avoid going before him.

Sir Antranek’s background and experience have taught him the value of preparedness, cunning and patience. Being put in the position of a leader has made him think more about long-term decisions and planning, like a chess master or a general. Which is exactly why Lord Coake chose him for the job. He likes to be active and doing things all the time. Thus, he is a regular member of the Sheriff’s Auxiliary Group as well as commander of the militia, and when not drilling the town defenders, is riding out on patrols, checking on the Medicine Wheel and staying in contact with leaders and Shamans among the Native People and Psi-Stalkers.

Description: Though a slightly smaller than average Vanguard Brawler, Sir Antranek carries himself with an aura of authority and strength that makes him a larger than life personality.

Experience Level: 7th level Cyber-Knight. (See *Rifts® Ultimate Edition RPG*, pages 61-67, for more about this O.C.C. Also see the *Cyber-Knights sourcebook* that is part of the *Coalition Wars®* series.)

Skills: Anthropology 70%, Body Building, Boxing, Breaking/Taming Wild Horses 55%, Climbing 98%, Horsemanship: Cyber-Knight 85%/65%, Hand to Hand: Martial Arts, Hunting, Kick Boxing, Land Navigation 68%, Languages: Vanguard Native Tongue, American & Dragonese/Elf, all at 98%, Spanish 97%, Literacy: American 85%, Lore: Demons & Monsters 70%, Outdoorsmanship, Paramedic 75%, Roadwise 70%, Streetwise 64%, Swimming 85%, Track & Trap Animals 60%/70%, and Wilderness Survival 70%.

Weapon Proficiencies: Blunt (+3 to strike and parry, +1 to throw), Shield (+2 to strike, +4 to parry), Staff (+2 to strike & parry, +1 to throw), Targeting (+2 to strike), Handguns (+3 to strike), Energy Rifle, Energy Pistol (both +1 to strike), and W.P. Paired Weapons.

Attacks per Melee: Six.

Bonuses: +4 (+10*)(+13**) on initiative, +2 to strike, +3 (+5*) to parry, +3 (+6**) to dodge, +6 to damage, +6 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +6 to pull punch, +3 to disarm, +2 to entangle, kick attack does 2D6 [leap kick does 3D8 but counts as two attacks], body flip/throw does 1D6; critical strike on 18-20, +3 on Perception rolls, 40% to trust/intimidate, (saves) +3 vs magic or poison, +2 vs Horror Factor, +10% vs coma/death, and Zen Combat bonuses***.

Bonus Notes for Cyber-Knight Combat: One asterisk (*) refers to the bonuses when the *Sixth Sense* is also activated; ** is all bonuses vs technology with the Sixth Sense ability in place. *** See descriptions and bonuses for Zen Combat in *Rifts® Ultimate Edition*, pages 65-66.

Magic: None. **P.P.E:** 26.

Psionics: The basic Cyber-Knight training. Considered a Minor Psychic, needs a 12 or better to save vs psionic attacks. Abilities are Create Psi-Sword (0; Antranek’s Psi-Sword is actually shaped like a club; he would rather bludgeon his foes than cut them to ribbons), Create Psi-Shield (half the normal I.S.P. cost), and Meditation (0). **I.S.P.:** 23.

Notable Equipment: A set of personalized, heavy, Mega-Damage body armor (85 M.D.C.), .38 revolver & 6 ammo clips (6 shots each), Wilk’s 330 laser pistol and 5 E-Clips (12 shots each), 5.56 assault rifle & 4 ammo clips (20 rounds each), C-14 laser assault rifle & grenade launcher with 2 E-Clips (10 shots each), shield, quarterstaff, backpack, gas mask & air filter, tinted goggles, hatchet, knife, silver cross, first-aid kit with extra bandages, tent, knapsack, saddlebags, 2 canteens, 2 week supply of rations, and some personal items.

Transportation: Riding horse (20 H.P., 26 S.D.C., 2 attacks per melee).

Money: 500 credits and 3,000 credits worth of saleable goods. Most of his other worldly goods have been donated back to the town’s defense fund.



Kimberly Welch

Many visitors to Moorcroft are impressed by how law-abiding and orderly the town can be. Much of this is due to the firm but fair hand of Sheriff Kimberly Welch.

Born and raised in Moorcroft, Kimberly became a *Demon Slayer* following in the footsteps of her father Simon and her older brother Malcolm. Her father had been a previous sheriff and always hoped that his two children would someday succeed him in protecting the town – Malcolm as the sheriff and Kimberly as one of his deputies.

To this end, Kimberly and Malcolm joined a group of traveling adventurers led by a Cyber-Knight as many youths with a desire for adventure do. She and her brother enjoyed many a grand adventure in the South and East. They saw a large part of the country, battled evil, saved lives, and gained valuable experience that would serve them well as defenders of their home town in the future.

It broke Kimberly’s heart to send home the sad news that Malcolm had been killed while fighting vampires on the border of Mexico. A few weeks later, she returned home with her brother’s body for a proper burial. She has stayed in Moorcroft ever since and became Sheriff when her grief-stricken father decided to retire. Simon Welch is still there for advice and backup whenever she needs him, and he is also a member of the Sheriff’s auxiliary, but the old sheriff lets his daughter run the Sheriff’s office with full authority as she deems best.

The townspeople love and respect Sheriff Welch, and she has proven to be as tough, capable and fair-minded as her father and grandfather before her. In addition to being the town’s main law enforcer and keeping the peace on a day-to-day basis, Sheriff Welch has another position that

is important to Moorcroft's welfare. If the town militia is mustered, she is Sir Antranek's second in command.

Sheriff Welch and the Vanguard Brawler Cyber-Knight get along with each other quite well. The two of them may not always see eye to eye or be considered friends, nor do they socialize or hang out together, however, the pair do share a mutual respect for each other. And they work well together. When they first started working together, Kimberly sometimes felt that the Cyber-Knight did not have the best interest of the townsfolk at heart. That has seemed to change. There was also a time where she thought it be better if their positions had been reversed, i.e. Sir Antranek as sheriff and Kimberly as militia commander, especially given her experience leading bands of mercenaries and adventurers. However, as she has gotten to know the Cyber-Knight better and has gained a greater appreciation of his talent and experience, she now feels that the Vanguard Brawler is indeed the best commander for the militia. Most townspeople would agree, as Sheriff Welch is more personable, sociable and, well, human than the Cyber-Knight. Making her more relatable.

Name: Kimberly Welch.

Race: Human.

Alignment: Scrupulous.

Attributes: I.Q. 15, M.E. 14, M.A. 21, P.S. 14, P.P. 13, P.E. 19, P.B. 12, Spd 13.

Hit Points: 45. **S.D.C.:** 38.

Height: 5 feet, 10 inches (1.78 m). **Weight:** 146 pounds (65 kg).

Disposition: Kimberly has many people fooled into thinking that she is tougher and more merciless than she really is. It comes with the job. She is passionate about her work as a lawman and protecting people. As such, she feels she can best accomplish her job by keeping people at a distance and playing the tough guy. And tough she is, able to whip and outgun any man twice her size. To this end, she often acts aloof and detached, especially toward outsiders (more of a professional demeanor than an uncaring one). She takes no guff and is quick to action, but remains fair. She is a total professional.

Description: A solidly-built, blue-eyed blonde woman. When in public, Kimberly is almost always in uniform.

Experience Level: 7th level Slayer.

Special Demon Slayer O.C.C. Abilities For more details on the "Slayer," see *Rifts® Mystic Russia*, pages 136-137. Abilities include, 1. Recognize Supernatural Shapechangers, 2. Impervious to Vampires, 3. Nightvision (500 feet/152 m) and See the Invisible, 4. Ley Line Healing/Rejuvenation, 5. Magic Spell Casting Abilities (see below).

Skills: Basic Math 85%, Boxing, Climbing 75%/65%, Hand to Hand: Martial Arts, Intelligence 66%, Land Navigation 70%, Languages: American 95%, Dragonese/Elven and Demongogian 85%, Literacy: American 71%, Lore: Demons & Monsters 85%, Faeries & Creatures of Magic 75%, Pilot: Automobile 77%, Swimming 80%, Tracking (people) 70%, and Wilderness Survival 70%.

Weapon Proficiencies: W.P. Axe (+2 to strike & parry, +1 to throw), W.P. Knife (+3 to strike, parry, and throw), W.P. Targeting (+3 to strike), W.P. Rifles (+4 to strike), W.P. Submachine-Gun (+3 to strike; fires silver bullets), W.P. Energy Rifles, and W.P. Paired Weapons.

Attacks per Melee: Six.

Bonuses: +3 on initiative, +2 to strike, +3 to parry and dodge, +3 to roll with punch/fall/impact, +7 to pull punch, body flip/throw, +2 to disarm, Karate & any hand strike/punch, any kick attack, can perform Holds, +2 to entangle, Critical Strike on an 18-20, +4 to save vs disease, +3 to save vs magic, +2 to save vs poison, +5 to save vs Horror Factor, +3 to save vs possession, and +8% to save vs coma/death.

Horror Factor Against Demons (special): As a Demon Slayer, Kimberly radiates a Horror Factor of 13 to Lesser Demons and H.F. 9 for Greater Demons.

Magic: Armor of Ithan (10), Call Lightning (15), Familiar Link (55), Fire Ball (10), Fire Bolt (7), Fists of Fury (10 or 50), Globe of Daylight (2), Lightblade (20), Magic Net (7), Magic Pigeon (20), Magic

Shield (6), Multiple Image (7), Tongues (12), Turn Dead (6). These are at +2 Spell Strength. **P.P.E:** 78.

Psionics: None.

Equipment: All the standard gear common to the Slayer O.C.C., including 1,300 rounds of silver-coated bullets, dozens of wooden stakes, wooden and silver crosses, a passing acquaintance with Reid's Rangers and Doc Reid himself, expertise in fighting vampires, a suit of Bushman EBA (has 78 M.D.C. left for main body), an NG-488 Cobra Turbo combat hovercycle (121 M.D.C. for main body), as well as a reliable horse.

Her pride and joy is a Splugorth Greatest Rune Weapon, a **Dragon Thunderer Battle Axe** named Maximus (1D4x10 M.D. and releases a thunderclap when it strikes, throwing range: 300 feet (91.4 m), and can cast the following spells as often as three times each, per day: Invulnerability, Levitation, Summon Rain and Calm Storm equal to an 8th level sorcerer. Scrupulous alignment. The weapon was given to her by Doc Reid after she saved his life and performed admirably in several skirmishes with vampires. He said that since he acquired it from a slain Shemarrian warrior, it seemed fitting to go back into the hands of another female warrior.

Ancient Weapons Master: Specialist

Optional Material for Heroes Unlimited™

By Robert Daley Jr

The Ancient Weapon Master, as presented in *Powers Unlimited® 2*, is an excellent addition to the standard power categories. However, I feel that it suffers two shortcomings. First of all, the mechanics force you to create a generalist, rather than a dedicated master. While the AWM is an excellent warrior, some players prefer heroes who have focused on the bow, katana, or staff, rather than one who has made himself highly competent in archaic weaponry. Second, the actual abilities don't work that well with many of the iconic weapons of the forces of good and evil. The paired weapon bonuses don't apply to the zweihander; the disabling strike is inappropriate for the axe-wielding berserker; and there is little benefit to a whip or shield. Therefore, I created an alternate option where the player can choose to be a true specialist, trained in one type of weapon and no others. This specialization limits the hero, but his or her focus unlocks amazing abilities and benefits.

Step 1 and 2: Attributes, Hit Points, and S.D.C.

As standard Ancient Weapon Master (AWM).

Step 3: Education and Special Skills

Roll as normal, but then subtract 1 entire program (just like the AWM) to show the focused study of their weapon. They receive 2 Physical skills to show the dedication to honing their bodies and may choose either Hand to Hand: Martial Artist or Assassin at no additional cost. However, they cannot take any W.P.s, neither modern nor ancient; this is clarified in Step 4. They receive Recognize Weapon Quality and Craft Weapon Special Skills just as the AWM, but they will only apply to their specialty.



Step 4: Weapon Selection

Select one type of weapon. It should be fairly specific; for examples, see Table #1 (Other sourcebooks have other skill selections). The specialization receives the skill bonuses as if they had taken the W.P., however it is the only weapon that receives these bonuses. For example, a Master who specialized in the sledgehammer would have the benefits from W.P. Blunt when wielding one, but would not when using a bat. The Master's specialization also receives the bonuses below:

Melee:

- +3 to pull punch.
- +2 attacks when using his weapon (+1 at levels 5, 10, and 15).
- +1 to strike/parry at levels 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, and 14.
- +1 to initiative/disarm at levels 2, 4, 8, and 12.
- No off hand penalties.
- Critical Strike from behind.
- KO, and Critical Strike (with Weapon), on a Natural 19 (-1 at levels 4, 8, and 12).
- Death Blow (with Weapon) on a Natural 20 (-1 at levels 5, 10, and 15).
- +1 to Damage, Entangle, Ensnare, and Throw at levels 1, 4, 8, and 12.

Ranged:

- +1 to strike/parry (melee) at levels 1, 4, 8, and 12. (If the ranged weapon is too small for this to be logical, like shuriken or mouth darts, the Master may instead take 1 appropriate non-weapon skill of choice.)
- +1 to initiative at levels 1, 4, 8, and 12.
- No off hand penalties.
- Critical Strike (with Weapon) on a Natural 19 (-1 at levels 7 and 14).

- KO (with weapon, including ranged) on a Natural 20 (-1 at levels 5, 10, and 15).
- Retrieving the load (arrow, dart, knife, etc.) from a holster, quiver, or pouch does not require an attack.

Archery:

- +50 feet (15.2 m) per level to Range.
- Rate of Fire: 3, +2 at level 2, +1 at levels 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, and 14.
- +1 to strike at levels 1, 3, 6, 9, 12, and 15.

Thrown Weapons:

- +20 feet (6.1 m) per level to Range.
- +2 attacks (with weapon), +1 at levels 5, 10, and 15.
- +1 to strike at levels 1, 4, 8, and 12.
- Can throw 2 weapons at once as a paired attack against one target.

Mouth Weapons:

- No ranged KO.
- +5 feet (1.5 m) per level to Range.
- Rate of Fire: 2, +1 at levels 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, and 14.
- +1 to strike at levels 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13.

Table #1

Long Bow, Short Bow, Crossbow: W.P. Archery
 Mace, Tonfa, Club, Hammer: W.P. Blunt
 Battle Axe, Double Bladed: W.P. Axe
 Katana, Broadsword: W.P. Sword
 Bull Whip, Cat o'Nine Tails: W.P. Whip
 Dagger, Cleaver, Razor: W.P. Knife
 Chain, Nunchuku, Flail: W.P. Chain
 Tower Shield, Buckler: W.P. Shield

Hatchets, Knives, Balls, Disks: W.P. Targeting
Spear, Pike, Lance: W.P. Pole Arm
Sai, Trident: W.P. Forked (**Rifts® Ultimate Edition**)
Mouth Darts, Blowgun: W.P. Mouth Weapon (**Ninjas & Superspies™**)

Step 5: Techniques

Not all techniques are appropriate for all games or weapons. Some are very cinematic (e.g. Elemental strike), while others are ill-fitting (e.g. Deadly Radius with a knife). The G.M. has final decision if a technique is appropriate for a particular game or weapon. Naturally, these abilities usually only apply when wielding his specialty weapon (exceptions are marked with a '+'). Techniques which may apply to both disciplines are marked with an asterisk (*); see Melee: *Thrown Attack* and Ranged: *Melee Mastery* for more information. In addition to the features listed below, the Master may select 6 techniques. He receives another selection every odd level after the first.

Melee:

- All Melee focused characters receive Disarm Expertise for free.
- Masters who have chosen to specialize in Shield may choose one additional technique or two physical skills of choice.

Ranged:

- All Ranged focused characters receive Dodge Projectiles and Steady Aim for free.
- Mouth Weapon users can hold their breath for an additional P.E./4 minutes. They receive the skills Ventriloquism and Imitate Voices/Impersonate for free. Finally, they receive 2 Domestic skills (usually Play Musical Instrument: a wind instrument, Sing, or Dance).
- All other (non-Mouth Weapon) Ranged focused characters receive Strength bonuses as written.

General

Armor Piercing: The Master has learned how to bypass armor, reducing the effective A.R. facing them by 2.

Armor Training+: The Master has learned how to move in armor more effectively. Any armor he wears has +1 A.R.

Broad Education: The Master has learned to use other weapons under the same W.P. as his specialty, letting them receive the skill's bonuses. However, they do not receive the benefit of any of the bonuses or techniques from his specialty. For example, a broadsword specialist wielding a katana receives the bonuses from W.P. Sword, but does not access his Master bonuses or techniques.

Concealed Weapon: First, the Master gets the skill Concealment (+10%, if he already has it). When concealing his weapon, his range is now up to 30 inches (0.8 m) by 10 inches (0.3 m) and 15 pounds (6.75 kg); he suffers a -5% penalty when the weapon is longer than 15 inches (0.4 m). However, he only needs to make this test against active inspections; he is considered automatically successful against casual observers.

Environmental Training: The Master has trained to fight in an environment usually considered unfavorable to classical weapons. The most common areas are underwater and zero gravity, but there may be others. While this training doesn't give him the ability to survive in the environment (like the ability to breathe underwater), his combat skills, including both range and damage, suffer no penalties. This may be taken multiple times to cover multiple environments.

Fluid Target+: The Master gains +1 to Automatic Dodge. This can be taken twice.

Increased Critical: Decrease the Master's Critical range by one.

Keen Warrior+: The Master has trained his mind to handle the pressures of combat. He receives +2 to Saving Throws vs Horror/Awe Factor and half penalties due to distractions or confusion. If taken a second

time, he receives another +2 vs Horror/Awe Factor, and no longer receives any penalties due to confusion or distractions in combat.

Learned Resistance+: The repeated strikes incurred during training has taught the Master how to minimize the impact of those strikes. He takes half damage from any weapon covered by the W.P. of his specialty.

Lightning Speed+: +3 to Initiative, +1D6 to Spd. This can be taken twice.

Weapon Technician: The Master is amazing at crafting his weapons. He gains +15% to Craft Weapons and Recognize Weapon Quality. Also, his skill progresses by 3% per level for Craft Weapons, and 5% for Recognize Quality. Finally, just like a Hardware Expert, both skills may exceed 100%, but they're still limited to his specialty.

Melee

Acrobatic Maneuvers: *Pole Arms and Staves only.* The Master receives +3 to Keep Balance and +10% to Climb, Gymnastics, and Acrobatics. The Master may add the length of his staff +2 feet (0.6 m) per level to his jumps and leaps when using his staff. Finally, Leap Attacks, Jump Kicks, and Flying Jump Kicks still cost multiple Attacks, but no longer prevent further strikes that melee.

Alternate Hand Training: *One-handed weapons only.* The Master can wield his chosen weapon in some fashion that doesn't use his hands. For example, it could be held in his mouth, attached to his foot (a boot knife for example), or in the crook of a limb. This means he can use his weapon in unusual positions and situations, like when tied up. A second benefit is that most fighters are not used to fighting against these angles, making them -3 to parry/dodge. However, the damage from such strikes is halved, and the Master loses his disarm resistance.

Always Armed*: The Master can pull his weapon from a scabbard/holster without using an Attack. If taken a second time, he can put the weapon away for free as well.

Blind Warrior*: The Master halves all penalties to melee combat when blind, deaf, or facing invisible opponents. If taken a second time, the penalties decrease to a maximum of -1.

Bodyguard*: The Master can attempt to parry an attack heading for another character within range. It costs an Attack, but he retains both his full bonuses and his own Automatic Parry.

Dazzling Display: The Master holds his action until he is attacked, then he parries that first attack at half bonuses. If successful, any opponent who witnessed the display must test against 8 + half the Master's level (saving throws vs Horror/Awe Factor apply). If they do not save, they are -4 to all combat actions against the Master for the rest of the encounter. If the Master fails the parry, then the Master suffers the -4 to all combat actions against the witnesses.

Deadly Radius: Opponents in melee range no longer receive benefits from being behind the Master. They do not receive a Critical from behind, nor does the Master suffer from associated penalties to parry/dodge. If taken a second time, the Master can defend against a number of opponents equal to 4 + half his experience level, without penalty.

Delicate Strike*: The Master can make an incredibly precise strike, such as striking a single card out of a thrown deck, cutting one's initials in a target, or snatching a cigarette from someone's mouth. This flashy maneuver requires a full Melee, a called shot of 12, and is done at half bonuses. Whether or not a particular maneuver is covered by this technique is left up to the G.M., but the action should be flashy and involve minimal damage. In addition to its mundane benefits, successful use of this technique adds +15% to the Master's Charm/Intimidate (or other social skills as appropriate).

Devastating Strike: When determining a target's resistance to damage, treat the Master's strength as Superhuman. This has no effect on lifting/carrying or enhanced damage, just the target's resistance. If taken a second time, treat his strength as Supernatural.

Disabling Strike*: As written.

Disarm Expertise*: Opponents trying to disarm the Master halve their bonuses. If they have no bonus, they can only disarm the Master on a Natural 19. The Master gets +3 to disarm.

Disarm Mastery: *Prerequisite: Disarm Expertise.* First, opponents with bonuses to disarm suffer from an additional -3 penalty; opponents without a disarm bonus require a Natural 20. If the opponent is successful, the Master may instead choose to lose his next attack (assuming he has one remaining that melee) instead of losing his weapon. Second, the Master receives another +2 to Disarm. Also, he may aim where the disarmed item will go. If aiming to land in the Master's hand (must be free) or the ground directly before/behind him, it requires no roll. If anywhere else, he may roll to strike with normal P.P. bonuses (but no others).

Distance Strike: The Master can now project his attacks 1 foot (0.3 m) per level. This requires an additional Attack, but targets are -4 to dodge or parry. This technique can be taken multiple times, each time increasing the multiplier (2 feet/0.6 m per level, 3 feet/1 m per level, etc.) up to 4 times.

Elemental Strike: The Master has figured out how to imbue his attacks with a touch of the elements. At the cost of an additional Attack, his strike will have the environmental effects of one element chosen when the technique is learned. The attack is still physical and can be parried as normal. However, some targets may take additional damage (fire against a vampire) and there may be secondary effects (at the G.M.'s discretion). This technique can be taken multiple times to learn additional elements, but only one element can be added to any particular attack.

Empowered Weapon*: The Master's connection to his weapon is almost mystical; as long as it remains in his hand, it has double its normal S.D.C. If taken a second time, the weapon is immune to any non-damaging psionic/magical/etc. effect that specifically targets it (teleport object, Liquefaction, etc.). If taken a third time, the weapon is indestructible as long as it remains in hand.

Ephemeral Strike: The Master gains the ability to strike and parry the intangible. Each strike costs an additional Attack, and parries also require an Attack (although the Master does not lose his Automatic Parry for other attacks). Both maneuvers are at half bonuses and quarter damage. This ability does not give him the ability to necessarily see his target.

Extra Arm: *Whip and Chain only.* This practice results in a bonus of +15% to Climb, +10% to Gymnastics and Acrobatics. The Master can use his weapon as an extended arm with a two-fingered hand. Most actions (typing, grabbing objects, etc.) will not require a test, but some highly precise skills (Pick Locks, Pick Pockets, etc.) may have a -15% penalty. If taken a second time, the Master can sense the resistance well enough to give a rough sense of touch. This allows him to perform delicate actions at only a -5% penalty, and even attempt to use other weapons; Melee: +2 strike/parry only, no strength bonuses to damage; Ranged: -4 to strike (no other bonuses).

Feather's Strike: At the cost of an additional Attack, a successful strike to an inanimate object will inflict the normal damage but the object will not show any sign of the damage until it is disturbed. For example, a tree could be sliced into logs, but appear intact until brushed by a small breeze. Also, a wall could be pulverized, but appear intact until it crumbles with a touch.

Feint*: The Master rolls to strike, but if successful, it does no damage. Instead, his opponent halves his defensive bonuses against the next attack targeting him. If taken twice, it removes all defensive bonuses. If taken three times, the next attack also gains a +5 bonus to Strike and +20% to damage.

Flexible Leverage: *Whip and Chain only.* The Master can lift and move his full carrying weight at distance with his weapon. While not suited to holding anything up, it allows the Master to move large objects quickly and aggressively. If taken a second time, he can move his full lifting weight at distance.

Ground Shock: *Blunt Strike Weapons only.* The Master strikes the ground with such ferocity that the impact causes a minor tremor. If the ground is a solid and packed surface, then everyone (friend and foe) within 10 feet (3 m) per level must test to maintain balance or be knocked down; there is a 50% chance of taking 1D4 damage from the fall.

Knockback Strike: *Non-Edged weapons only.* This is functionally identical to the Minor Power: Knockback Attack (**Powers Unlimited**®

3). If taken a second time, double the distance, as if the Master had Supernatural Strength.

Opposed Weapon*: The Master has trained against the weaknesses of one melee weapon proficiency. When facing off against an opponent wielding such a weapon, his opponent's combat bonuses are halved. This technique can be taken up to four times, each time covering a different W.P. Unarmed does not count as a W.P.

Oversize Training*: The Master can wield a weapon 50% larger and/or heavier. Usually, this means the weapon inflicts one more die of damage, but other effects may be possible at the G.M.'s discretion. Cinematic games may allow this to be taken multiple times.

Paired Weapon Training: *Cannot be taken with Secondary weapon. One-handed weapons only.* The Master has trained to use his weapon paired. He gains +3 to parry and +1 to strike when wielding 2 weapons. Otherwise, it is identical to W.P. Paired.

Paralyzing Strike*: The Master chooses to forgo damage in an attempt to disable. Using this technique, the Master halves his strike bonus and inflicts only 1 point of damage to a single limb. If the opponent successfully rolls with the impact, only that one point of damage will occur. However, if they do not roll with the impact, they must test against Pain (15). If they fail, the limb is paralyzed for 1 melee (or 1 minute, if the strike was a Critical success) per level. If they save, there is no effect, but the Master can attempt the strike again, and each time the difficulty of the Saving Throw will increase by 2.

Parry Projectile*: As written.

Perfected Shield: *Shield only.* The shield can now be used as a manifestation of the Master's will. If he can raise the shield between himself and its source, he gains +4 to saving throws against either magic or psionics. Which one he can save against is chosen when the technique is learned. If chosen again, he may defend against the other one. If taken a third time, the Master is +4 to saving throws/parry/dodge vs area attacks (grenades, waves, etc.) when he interposes his shield.

Piercing Strike: As his only action that melee round, the Master can make one strike attempting to completely destroy a target. If he makes a strike roll of 14 including bonuses, the weapon will pass through his target, leaving either a slice or a hole. If the roll fails, the weapon used is damaged, if not destroyed (actual amount of damage is up to the G.M.). If performed against a living target, the target may attempt to parry or dodge, but if they fail they take double damage directly to Hit Points. While this attack bypasses A.R. and ignores S.D.C., some objects may be immune due to sheer indestructibility.

Position Mastery*: The Master suffers from no penalties for fighting prone, hanging upside down, or while in motion. This includes fighting from a vehicle, on horseback, running, or sitting.

Powerful Parry: If the Master successfully parries a melee attack, the attacker's weapon (or his body if a Hand to Hand attack) takes 1D6 damage (strength bonuses do not apply). This still counts as an Automatic Parry. If taken again, the damage goes up by one die, up to a limit of either 4D6 or the weapon's usual damage, whichever is less.

Relentless Strike: When using this technique, the Master halves his strike bonus. If the Master is successfully parried by an object, the object used to parry takes half the damage.

Secondary Weapon*: *Cannot be taken with Paired Weapon training. One-handed weapons only.* The Master has trained to use a second weapon. If his chosen specialty is a Shield, then any one-handed weapon may be chosen. For all other specialties, he must choose Shield, Knife, or a similar defensive weapon. He receives the appropriate W.P., but it receives no Master bonuses or techniques. If taken a second time, his secondary weapon receives +2 to parry and strike.

Thrown Attack: The Master not only takes no penalties for throwing his weapon, but gains +2 to Strike. Each time this technique is taken again, he chooses a starred (*) technique from the Ranged list.

Tripping Strike: At the cost of an additional Attack, a successful strike can now knock down the opponent. If taken a second time, it is a critical knockdown.

Two-Handed Training: *Two-handed weapons only.* The Master has learned how to use his weapon almost as if it was a paired set. It is iden-

tical to W.P. Paired with minor changes. Instead of attempting a pair of weapon attacks against a single target, he may instead attack using his weapon and a headbutt, wheel kick, or sweep. He can also perform a double parry and a wheel kick or sweep. The Master receives +3 to parry, +2 to balance, and +2 to roll with impact.

Weapon Grapple: *Staff, Pole Arm, Whip, or Chain only.* The Master can now perform holds, chokes, and throws with his weapon using his Entangle bonuses. If taken a second time, the Master can perform locks and Critical Throws. He may also grapple and still attack or defend (using either Hand to Hand strikes or a second whip/chain as appropriate) against other opponents at half combat bonuses, and no bonuses to damage. Masters using a second whip or chain may attempt to grapple a second target. If taken a third time, they may attack and defend with normal combat bonuses and half their normal damage bonus. A Master with two chains/whips may grapple two opponents and still attack or defend using Hand to Hand at half combat bonuses and no damage bonus. If taken a fourth time, a Master with two chains/whips may grapple two opponents and still attack and defend using Hand to Hand at full combat bonuses.

Ranged

Arcing Shot: Assuming there is sufficient clearance above, the Master can aim in a large overhead arc, negating penalties from cover, but halving his range.

Blind Targeting: The Master only has half penalties for blindness, but his target must be within earshot (or other sense).

Controlled Strike*: The Master may now use the Pull Punch maneuver on ranged attacks.

Cumulative Strike: The Master repeatedly strikes a single small location to increase his attack's damage. This technique requires a Called Shot with a difficulty of 12 each time. Penalties increase by -3 for each shot after the first. Each strike after the first increases the damage multiplier by one until a shot is missed (2nd shot: x2, 3rd shot: x3, etc.).

Curving Shot*: The Master's attacks now curve and twist. Any active defense against them suffers from a -2 penalty. This technique may be taken up to four times and the effects are cumulative.

Deductive Shot*: The Master can now aim behind himself or to his side using a reflection, a shadow, or other means, without penalties.

Delayed Shot: *Prerequisite: Arcing Shot.* The Master may use ballistic arcs to delay his shot's impact. He announces the attack, but its strike will occur during his next attack. This strike is made at half bonuses. The target may attempt to dodge this attack, but it does act as an opponent (remember defensive reaction limits). If the Master takes this technique again, he can delay the strike up to a full melee round. However, the Master must choose how many attacks later it will land when it is announced. Also, the delayed attack will suffer from a penalty of -1 strike per attack in between its announcement and its impact.

Dodge Projectiles*: As written.

Eagle Eyes*: The Master's eyesight is 50% better than normal. If taken again, he sees at twice normal range.

Effective Packing: The Master can fit twice as many projectiles as would normally fit inside the container, quiver, or holster.

Enhanced Range: +10 feet (3 m) to range per level. This technique may be taken up to 4 times.

Ephemeral Shot: The Master has figured out how to effectively strike intangible targets. Such attacks are made at half bonuses. The first time this is taken, a successful strike does 10% damage. If taken a second time, it does quarter damage.

Hidden Strike: *Thrown Weapons and Mouth Weapons only.* The Master can attempt to launch a projectile without being seen. The Master receives the Palming skill (or +10% if already possessed), and tests with it. If successful, he may throw one projectile at half bonuses and half damage. Casual bystanders automatically fail to notice the attack, but active observers may test with Perception. If taken a second time, he may throw with full strike bonuses. Active observers now take a penalty of -3 to perceive the attack. If taken a third time, he can perform this Technique at full damage. An active observer's Perception penalty is now -6.

Internal Quiver*: *Mouth Weapons and small Thrown Weapons only.* The Master has learned to swallow small indigestible items and then regurgitate them later, unharmed. The objects must be small enough to completely swallow, and he can also only hold about a handful in his stomach. It requires 1 Attack to swallow, 2 Attacks to retrieve, and a full Melee Round to covertly retrieve.

Melee Mastery: +2 to strike (melee) and parry with the weapon. Each time taken again, the Master chooses a starred (*) technique from the Melee list.

Multiple Shot: The Master may launch multiple projectiles at one target, each at full damage, but at half strike bonuses. Archers may fire 2 arrows, and one more at levels 5 and 10. Throwers may throw 3 objects from one hand (assuming they can hold them) and add one more at level 7. If taken a second time, the Master may use the technique at full bonuses.

Observer Awareness*: The Master has a sixth sense about being observed. He receives the Detect Ambush skill (+15% if already possessed). Whenever the Master is being watched/listened to, even passively through a camera or at long range, he may make a Perception Roll (12) to notice. This will not tell him how or why, just that he is under scrutiny. If taken a second time, this sense is almost supernatural. He receives the Detect Concealment skill (+10% if possessed). He also receives +2 to Perception, and may make a Perception Roll (15) when under magical or spiritual surveillance. However, this does not give him the ability to track or even see the observer, just knowledge of their existence. He may also make a Perception Roll (18), if he is being personally tracked (e.g. through smell or Object Read). In these cases, it would manifest as a sensation like 'the willies' or 'someone walking over my grave.'

Pinning Strike*: Instead of inflicting damage, the Master may choose to pin the target's limb to a nearby surface. The target will take 1 S.D.C., and the rest of the damage that would have been inflicted instead becomes the effective cumulative Physical Strength required to break free. Additional strikes add half of their damage to the difficulty.

Poison Mastery*: The Master receives Lore: Poison (or +20% if already possessed). The Master's dedication to the dangerous substances has increased his Saving throw against Poisons and Toxins by +5 and all effects and durations are 10% less.

Redirect Shot: The Master can now strike and deflect projectiles with his own. This requires a Called Shot of 12 and being aware of the attack. Targeting slow projectiles and arcing shots is done at +2 to strike, and deflecting fast projectiles like bullets is done at -6 to strike. Striking one's own projectile is simple (and often used to show off), but striking someone else's is done at half bonuses. If successful, the shot is deflected. If this technique is taken a second time, the redirected shot can be aimed. After a successful deflection, roll a second attempt to strike at half of the bonuses used to redirect. If taken a third time, the Master can redirect an opponent's projectile at full bonuses. If taken a fourth time, the Master can attempt to redirect volleys from a single source, but it requires matching projectiles. (For example, a volley of 4 orbital spheres would require 4 knives.)

Ricochet Shot*: First time taken, this is identical to the Trick Shooting: Ricochet technique. If taken a second time, it can bounce off an additional surface and can return to the Master. He can make a test (12, P.P. bonuses apply) to catch it as it returns to his hand. If the Master has the Snatch Arrows technique, no test is required. If taken a third time, +1 surface and may divide the damage between all the surfaces as he sees fit. If taken a fourth time, +1 surface and this maneuver is done with full strike bonuses.

Snatch Arrows*: This is the ability of the Master to catch muscle-powered projectiles, not just arrows. At the cost of his Automatic Parry, the Master can use his parry bonuses to catch a projectile. If taken a second time, he receives a +2 to this roll and can catch 2 projectiles, one with each hand. If taken a third time, he receives another +2, and the maneuver counts as an Automatic Parry.

Spatial Memory*: The Master has learned how to memorize a location. This technique has two methods: in and out of combat. By using

2 Attacks (combat) or 2 Melee Actions (non-combat), the Master may memorize the placement of every visible item within a 100 foot (30.5 m) radius. This accurate picture lasts for the Master's level in minutes (combat) or hours (non-combat). The exact location of anything human-sized or larger can be recalled automatically; anything half that size requires a memory test at 75% (I.Q. bonus applies). Smaller objects or specific details may require a memory test with a penalty of -5% to -70% (G.M.'s discretion). The Master also receives a bonus of +3 to Perception Rolls and +10% to Prowl within the memorized area.

Split Focus: *Requires the ability to launch multiple projectiles.* The Master may now aim at multiple targets, provided he can perceive them. Each attack is handled separately, and each attack suffers from a -1 strike penalty per additional target. This means a disk throwing Master who can throw three disks at a time can target three different targets (provided he can see them all), but suffers -2 to strike to each attack.

Steady Aim*: The Master suffers no penalties for attacking while prone, hanging upside down, running, or other penalties due to movement or position. This includes riding on horseback or in a vehicle.

Superior Aim: The Master can make one throw/shot at incredible accuracy. Each melee doing nothing but aiming, he gains +1 to strike. He cannot move, or take any defensive actions; he must focus on aiming. If his roll to strike, including bonuses, is within his Critical range then it counts as a Critical Strike.

Targeted Shot: As written in Trick Shooting: Targeted Shot.

Tracking Shot*: At the cost of an additional Attack, the Master takes no penalties from moving targets. This also forces characters with Auto-Dodge to revert to standard dodging against this attack.

Tripping Shot: At the cost of an additional Attack, the Master halves his strike bonus and damage, but the attack can inflict Knockdown. If taken a second time, the technique uses full strike bonuses. If taken a third time, the Knockdown is a Critical Knockdown.

Unexpected Strike: *Non-Mouth Weapons only.* A Master can attack without using his hands, but at half bonuses and no damage bonus. He can throw a weapon using his mouth (1/4 range), by kicking, or striking (with a bat, for example). However, only one item can be thrown in this

fashion, despite any other techniques. If the Master's focus is archery, this would allow firing with one's feet or with one arm and teeth.

Step 6: Equipment Budget

These should be the same as written, with one change. If the magical weapon option is chosen, then the specialty's benefits only apply to that specific weapon. For example, the Master's techniques and bonuses only apply with the "Blackmoor Staff of Valor." If that weapon is lost, the Master is at a severe disadvantage. Somehow replacing that damaged or lost weapon could be an entire story in itself.

Step 7: Alignment and Rounding Out

As written.

Notes:

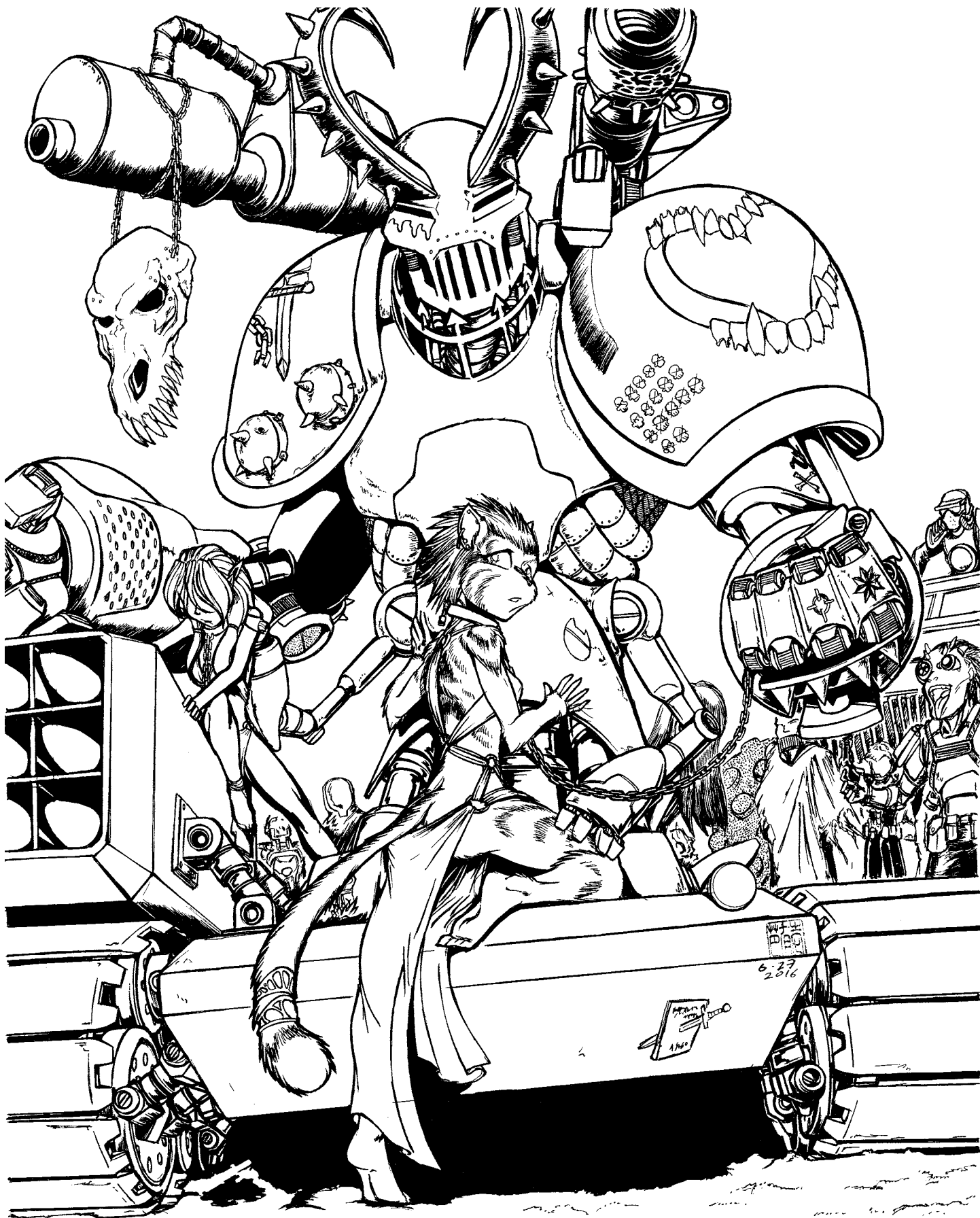
First, the Techniques could theoretically be swapped out to provide some more personalization for the base AWM, but which ones to swap out and so forth is an exercise left to the G.M. Likewise, some of these techniques could also see some use in **Ninjas and Superspies™** as weapon focused Martial Arts Techniques, Zenjoriki, or similar. Once again, it's the G.M.'s prerogative.

Second, modifying the power level is fairly easy. If a player wants a character with some high level training but without these limitations, I suggest the Articles "A Cut Above" (**The Rifter® #30**) and Archers (**The Rifter® #45**). For a player who wants a Minor hero option, there are two methods. One, cut the number of available techniques in half and keep a close eye on which techniques are available. Two, make combat outside of his or her training more difficult. Accordingly, anytime the AWM tries to use combat with any weapon outside of his training, halve all his combat bonuses.

Third, modifying one's personal weapon could use a few more options and therefore, modifiers.

Modification	Craft Penalty	Cost Increase
Involves Explosives or Electronics	-5%	Varies
Involves miniaturization	-10%	+20%
Creation of an Energy Weapon*	-40%	Varies
Personalized (Only the AWM receives the weapon's bonuses)	-5%	+20%
Involves Liquids	-5%	Varies
Increase S.D.C. by 50%	-5%	+75%
Increase S.D.C. by 100%	-10%	+150%
Increase S.D.C. by 150%	-15%	+225%
Collapsible (Blunt)	-10%	+10%
Collapsible (Bow)	-20%	+20%
Collapsible (Edged)	-30%	+50%
Disguised (G.M.'s decision if reasonable)	-5% to 15%	+15%
Insulated against cold, heat, or electricity (Protects the user, e.g. rubber grips)	-5% (each)	+10% (each)
Resistant to cold, heat, or electricity (Weapon takes half damage)	-10% (each)	+10% (each)

* Warning, this could be abused, so consider if the nature of the weapon has changed. For example, does an energy blade count as a broadsword for this warrior?



Wilderness Community – Karimyo

Optional Material for Rifts®

By Brett Caron

Located in the Pecos Badlands, this small community lies near the eastern fringe of Sabre Lasar's territory. The name is bastardized from the Spanish *carinjo*, meaning 'honey.' In the past, when Emperor Lasar has called for aid during times of trouble, several of the roving gangs of Pecos raiders who frequent Karimyo have joined his army. The townspeople consider themselves already somewhat under Sabre Lasar's rule.

(Recently, new and powerful presences have been making moves in the area. Apparently, even Emperor Lasar has taken notice of their arrival! Karimyo could see an echoing boom in their economy as a result, but for now all they have are rumors of a place called Nowhere and a cabal of Techno-Wizards who make their home there.)

The desert scrub nearby isn't great for farming, but there is some grass surrounding the ranch on the west side of town. There, cattle graze under the watchful eye of their minder, a human on horseback who carries a well-used energy rifle. (8th level Cowgirl O.C.C., C-12 laser rifle.)

Two decades ago, Karimyo's well water was contaminated by an alien pathogen – meaning it has no natural water source to draw from. Luckily, a Water Warlock had arrived from the south just weeks before the contamination and agreed to stay and help. Until recently, the arrangement was good – even the local gangs wouldn't cause too much trouble when they rolled through town out of respect.

But just after the onset of the Tolkeen War, terrified that the Warlock would leave them to flee or go fight the CS, the most powerful of the townspeople enslaved the Warlock to use his magic for their own gain. They, and the bandit clans who back their government, force him to continue his services and prevent his escape by holding his wife, Naroph, captive, raising their children as hostages among the clans (moving them between clans once per year – their current ages are 7 and 9). The architect of this is the most powerful person in Karimyo, an N'reta known as Divillo who owns the ranch.

These days, Karimyo is more prosperous than ever, but this has come at a price. The bandit clans, some of whom have joined Sabre Lasar in previous campaigns and consider themselves his allies, are always getting bolder and sometimes occupy the town for weeks at a time. They challenge each other in bars or on the street, and occasionally full-blown firefights ensue (always resulting in property damage, and the occasional townspeople does get killed along with bandits).

The result is a fairly peaceful town that becomes completely lawless whenever the criminal element comes to call, which is often. The locals thank the Goddess for the peaceful days while dreading the next visitation, but with Divillo's increasing influence over the bandit leaders, the gangs are terrorizing townspeople less as time goes on. Instead they pick on travelers and adventurers when feeling antsy.

Population:

- 100 families, about 300 people living there full time.
- 1D4x10 transient adventurers passing through town, not including any player characters.
- 2D6x10 visiting Pecos raiders/bandits (sometimes as much as 1D6x100!) divided into 1D4+1 rival/allied gangs.

- 1D4x10 visiting *Mojave* or *Papago* Indigenous people.
- 1D4x10 visiting Psi-Stalkers from the *Wild Night* or *Children of Scales* tribes.

Population Breakdown:

- 60% humans.
- 32% D-Bees of various types, especially those most often found in the New West and Lone Star.
- 4% supernatural creatures, creatures of magic, and other non-humanoid beings.
- 3% mutant animals.
- 1% civilized Psi-Stalkers.

Most of the population lives in shanties (composed of salvaged S.D.C. or M.D.C. metal) or tents, the latter of which are in a loose formation to the east of the New Well where they get their water. This is also where most visitors erect their own tents or dwellings while staying in town, but always on the unoccupied edges.

The center of town is a thoroughfare of a dozen or so buildings; this is where most of the businesses operate. At the northern edge of the settlement is the tallest building, where Divillo makes his home above his very own drinking establishment. Some of the larger shanty houses are close by, but none are bigger than Divillo's. And he makes sure everyone knows it.

Places of Note

Divillo's Ranch

On the western edge of town is a large, fenced-in area of green grass where cows and horses graze. Usually 6D6+10 cows are available for purchase, depending on whether a large shipment has just left town, and 4D6 horses. Run by a 6th level cattle rancher by the name of One-Eyed Smithy, Divillo is rarely here unless he's showing off his stock. Prices are 1000-4000 credits per horse or by barter, depending on whether the horse is a workhorse or riding horse. Cows are 800-2000 credits apiece, and One-Eyed Smithy buys bulls for half that.

The Shiny Dollar Saloon

Its sign is nothing but a polished metal disc that glints in the sun, but enough to tip off anyone who hears the name of the place. Once inside, the Shiny Dollar isn't much more than a bar, a wraparound balcony ringed by rooms for rent, and a piano in the corner. The piano is almost always occupied by Blind Skryvrtjsh, or Blind Skriv, a three-armed, 18-fingered, avian D-Bee who has a great ear (equal to amplified hearing with an ultra-ear and sound filter) and can read a crowd even without the use of his eyes.

The bar is run by the son of a retired mercenary, Jeebles the Younger. His mother, a hotshot RPA pilot who's now senile in her old age, left him the establishment and now withers away in their small home behind the saloon. Her old, customized SAMAS collects dust in the basement of the bar, but is in no shape to fly without 1D6 hours of an Operator's attention or twice that by a character with Robot Mechanics and/or Mechanical Engineer.

Prices are fair, gambling is encouraged, and fights have to be taken outside. If things get rough, Jeebles keeps his mom's old C40-R rail gun on a swiveling gimbal arm locked above the bar, and has run out more than one puff-chested ganger with their tails between their legs.

We Got Everything

This general store carries wilderness survival gear, rations, and some common weapons, ammo, and armor. This is mostly gear to survive in the badlands, but includes limited Mega-Damage equipment (mostly

Bandito Arms and Northern Gun). For the illiterate, the sign depicts a traveler with a cartoonishly large backpack. Nothing in here is too high-tech, but everything is quality (if a bit used). Dok, the kindly middle-aged woman who runs the store, will sell for credits but will mostly want to barter for useful goods she can stock her shelves with or trade locally.



The New Well

Formerly the home of the Water Warlock and his family on the inward edge of the tent city, this building is guarded by a mated pair of Vintex mercenaries hired by Divillo. They only let one person inside at a time to have their containers filled by the Warlock within. Anyone who presses the issue will have to deal with the trigger-happy mercs, and a few deaths have taught the locals not to bother.

Luckily, there is no charge for water. Once inside, the person supplicates themselves before an idol representing the Goddess of the Wasteland. This allows the Warlock secluded behind the idol to draw from their P.P.E. and he fills whatever containers they have with them (up to 20 gallons/76 liters) and they leave. Talking is not allowed, and the Vintex are always listening. If they suspect anyone is trying to free the Warlock, they will radio Divillo and immediately burst in, guns blazing.

Op Shop

Underneath an unlabeled picture of a wrench, this simple workshop has barely anything of value and owner Boon the Operator is an old man. But he's experienced (14th level!) and currently teaching his young D-Bee apprentice (Purt, almost a 1st level Operator) the trade. He can soup-up most weapons and armor, but without additional parts he can only do so at half his normal proficiency. He has tools and only enough scrap metal to repair 4D6x10 M.D.C. unless he is brought more to work with. He has an E-Clip recharger which takes 8 hours per short clip or 12 hours for a long clip (can charge only 2 at a time).

Hands of Inner Peace

This quiet tent smells of fresh herbs and leads to a basement dwelling, cool and safe. Here visitors or townspeople can be cured by magic, psychic, or holistic healing. The healer, Zujenia Romani, is a refugee from her European clan of gypsy nomads. She trusts the Megaverse to lead her back to her people, but for now feels that she is needed here. She is a 6th level mystic with a focus on healing powers and spells. Life-saving treatments are administered immediately, but she expects some payment for her services (however, she will sometimes take a token payment such as a trinket or snack if the person can't pay or barter).

The Stable

Vehicles and horses can be left here, where they will be watched over. Theft is uncommon, since the security is a hyperactive Crazy with severe OCD who counts the inventory continuously throughout his shift. Payment is a mere 10 credits a day or by barter – of course, even when people pay the Crazy, he may not like it when they take 'his' vehicle back!

Wasteland Exchange

This huge tent (30 feet/9.1 m tall and more than 100 feet/30.5 m long/wide!) is neutral ground for all the Pecos raiders, Psi-Stalkers, Simvan, Indigenous people, and adventurers of all shades and stripes. Here anyone can trade or buy at the usual Black Market prices. Violence is not permitted, fights and disagreements will either go outside or troublemakers risk being destroyed by the displeased vendors and customers.

The Beehive

Divillo spends most of his time here whenever he can. He keeps several hives of bees (a rough total might be close to 300,000 insects!) from which he harvests honey. Fermenting some of it into mead, he sells both varieties (along with traditional alcoholic drinks/beer and the 'freshest water in town') at the tavern. Divillo lives above the Beehive in a large, two-story apartment, but can frequently be found holding court in the Beehive itself, wooing impressive travelers or gang leaders.

People of Note

Divillo "the Anteater," or "the Honey King"

An unusual N'reta, he exhibits none of the expansive good nature of most of his long-nosed kind. Divillo is a cold, ruthless businessman, but he does crave the love and acceptance of others. This is why he enslaved the good-hearted Water Warlock, for fear of losing his home and neighbors. It's why he spends so much time trying to impress people with his wealth and power (and his insecurities mean he binge-eats bees by the handful on his bad days). But besides his vulnerabilities, he has many strengths as well.

Divillo's natural senses have been augmented with cybernetics, and he can not only speak American through a vocabulator but also see in ultraviolet and has nightvision (useful for beekeeping and ranching both). He also has a concealed laser rod in his left leg and one of his fingers is composed of 3 detachable grenade knuckles (2D6 M.D. each to a 12 foot/3.7 m radius). Although he has the capacity to speak American, he rarely does, letting his assistant (a 3rd level Rogue Scholar with a focus on languages, named Roxo) speak for him.

Divillo has brokered a deal with the rulers of a neighboring settlement: in exchange for gasoline, he provides them with cattle, beef, and fertilizer from his ranch. He wields this like a scepter, charging for the gasoline in Karimyo and increasing his hold over the people here. He's currently in the process of trying to cement a similar deal with another



settlement nearby, a place known as Gohjjunk, for machine parts salvaged from their extensive junkyard.

He won't listen to anyone who pleads for mercy on behalf of the Warlock, perhaps explaining that it's for the town's own good before ignoring them and instructing his bodyguards (a Full Conversion 'Borg and an amoral Psi-Slinger) to shoo them away. This can get bloody, as both protectors are usually itching for a little action and know they have Divillo's backing to do what they like.

Vito Acosta, Water Warlock

Vito felt an urge to leave Mexico and come north almost twenty years ago. He knew it felt right when he settled in Karimyo, but didn't know why until shortly thereafter when their water supply became contaminated. He spent many happy years helping the town survive, even mar-

rying and raising a family. Now his children are gone and his wife is held hostage in exchange for his servitude.

The Warlock languishes in his private quarters within the New Well, never allowed to venture beyond the curtains backing the Goddess's idol there. He knows that Divillo keeps his wife captive in his home above the Beehive, but can't do anything about it without getting himself killed. Although he's amenable to the thought of escape, he will only act if his wife is already safe. Even then, he fears that his children will die immediately once the gangs find out what's transpired.

Gang Leaders and Gangs in the Karimyo Area

Shooba, King of the Redlight Dead Heads

The Redlight Dead Heads are a nomadic gang of Pecos raiders who frequent Karimyo. They're known for using hit-and-run tactics with motorcycles, hovercycles, and trucks to herd or lure tougher targets into waiting ambushes. Their warriors favor explosives, even going so far as to attach mini-missiles to javelins and hurl them from the back of vehicles.

Shooba, their leader, is a vicious Vanguard Brawler who rose to the top of this band of cutthroats. All blooded warriors of the gang (those who have killed a CS soldier in combat) wear the helmet or faceplate of their first, latest, or favorite kill, always painted bright red. Those who aren't yet blooded still wear cannibalized CS armor whenever possible (90% of the gang wears patchwork armor of this type which grants 20+6D6 M.D.C.) but are not allowed to repaint it. They are reckless in pursuit of their 'blooding' to elevate them alongside their betters.

Shooba is hated by all the other gangs in the area, and with good reason. He is a former exile of the House of Skullgrazer and has led many raids on them and the other major gang in the area, Pinky's Rejects. Personally, he loves a good fight and is always on the lookout for someone to call out for some real or imagined slight.

Bands of the Redlight Dead Heads can number anywhere from 3D6 to 1D6x10, with the entire population somewhere around 160.

Pinky, the Reject Queen

Made up of outcasts, mutants, and others unwanted or welcome anywhere else, Pinky's Rejects have begun to make a name for themselves as a force to be reckoned with. With access to a savvy Operator who is incredible at cannibalizing otherwise-broken gear into working order, they have scavenged their way to the middle and are aiming for the top of the heap. Their gear ranges from crappy to decent, and they rarely have access to higher levels of technology.

Pinky herself is a Burster, a human mutant from the Wasteland. Her mutation is not just psionics – her left arm is an underdeveloped vestigial claw, and the patchy pink hair on her head sits atop features that look like running wax. She keeps the withered limb wrapped to her chest and compensates with telekinesis. She has a real chip on her shoulder, especially for those who comment on her mutation (or any mutants, for that matter).

The Rejects' numbers are constantly in flux, partly because they are so fanatically loyal to their leader that the less capable members engage in suicide tactics (explosive vests, cannon fodder, and the like). At any moment, there are 2D6x10 mutants and 1D6x10+10 other raiders who fight for their Queen.

Apocalypse Jasha, "The Bloody Tread," or "Tankmaster of Pecos"

Most who encounter the *Serdtshe Yedokov*, or the Heart Eaters of Pecos, assume that the leader of the group is some kind of robot pilot. In fact, the looming cyborg is a Holocaust shocktrooper, formerly of Warlord Orloff's camp in the cold land of Russia. Flung far from his home in the War Camps, this beastly fighter has decided to become the foremost Warlord of these badlands instead.

Jasha is a mad dog killer, and his raiders know it. His souped-up, treaded lower body can keep up with the rest of his gang's ground vehicles (up to 120 mph/192 km!) and no other single raider in the area can boast the firepower his chassis provides.

Although small in number, his band of savages are selected for their cruelty and bloodlust. He forces every two new hopefuls to battle to the death in front of him before he welcomes the winner into the Heart Eaters. Before they can take the name, they must consume the heart of their opponent.

Aside from Jasha himself (he leads 60-70% of all raids personally), the gang uses trucks and jetpacks to deliver heavily armed killers right into the fray. They rarely have more subtlety than an all-out assault, and frequently suffer heavy losses. Jasha doesn't mind; he believes this only makes the gang's veterans even stronger. Besides, they've never lost a battle!

The Heart Eaters' reputation is growing all the time. Under Jasha's iron fist, the slave trade in this area has never been better. It certainly keeps the new parts, repairs, and reloads coming – for the time being, anyway.

Currently, their numbers sit at roughly 120, but they are frequently at lower strength after a battle (80+5D6). Bands range from 2D6 to 4D6 unless Jasha leads them personally, in which case there is an additional 6D6 of them.

Hook, Line, and Sinkers for Karimyo and the Pecos Badlands

Elemental Vengeance

Hook: A group of Warlocks (a mix of elements) have traveled from Dweomer to investigate the rumors of one of their kind being imprisoned in Karimyo. They may encounter the players outside of town, or somewhere within the city limits.

Line: An agent of Divillo's (a gang member, or one of his own, perhaps even Roxo) approaches the player characters and offers them an exorbitant sum to chase away or kill the Warlocks. They may lie about

the Warlocks' intentions, saying that they are evil or otherwise not what they seem.

Sinker: Although Divillo's agents don't know it, they are right! The Warlocks were sent not by Dweomer, but the True Federation. They seek to destroy the town's water supply to settle a grudge that one of Dunscon's lieutenants has with Divillo.

Engineering A Rescue

Hook: The town's Operator apprentice, Purt, has had enough and wants to free Acosta's wife and children. However, he has no idea where the children are being held. He asks the players to help!

Line: Purt has drinking buddies in each of the major gangs, and hopes that these contacts can lead them to where the children are.

Sinker: Divillo knows of the Operator's scheme, and wants him dead! To avoid souring his relationship with old Boon, he will try to make it look like an accident by planting explosives in the Op Shop while Boon is not there.

Apocalypse Meow

Hook: A beleagured feline D-Bee wanders the badlands around Karimyo, desperately seeking refuge in the town. She is fleeing the Heart Eaters, and is a former slave dancer for Jasha's entertainment. She asks the player characters to hide her from him.

Line: Jasha is insane with rage, and demands his runaway slave be returned to him. Divillo has no clue what he's talking about, but the Russian won't listen to reason and says he has a stolen CS nuke that he'll use to flatten Karimyo – in 3 days!

Sinker: The nuke is a bluff. However, Jasha has gotten his hands on a quartet of medium-range missiles and a launcher, which are at his gang's camp (2 days on horseback from town) and pointed at Karimyo. He will position troops near town and then fire the missiles as the overture to an all-out attack, unless he is stopped or talked out of it somehow.

I am Legion, Episode III

An Adventure and Official Source Material for Splicers®

Concept developed by Chris "Slappy" Kluge and Charles "Chuck" Walton II

Written by Chris Kluge

NPC Write-Ups and Quick stats by Lance Colley

Samaritan Co-created by Todd Spencley and Charles Walton II

Illustrated by Charles Walton

Note: For Part I, see **The Rifter® #71-72 Special Double Issue**, page 86. For Part II, see **The Rifter® #73**, page 63.

Change of Plans

Once the players are on the ground, Sr. Archangel Drake Benton leads the group out of earshot of the Dracos Outrider pilots so that he can comfortably voice his concerns (the same concerns that should be on every player's mind).

"Obviously the mission is compromised. Following through with the strike on Legion would be suicide. I say we head home and try to flush out the traitor."

Sweeper Shauna Davies then interjects, "I'm not sure that's the best move. From what I've heard, Legion likes to play games, and this is starting to feel like she's toying with us. Who knows what she may have waiting for us at home. We don't know who's involved, but we know that it's someone in the Senate. Even if there aren't a dozen more traps for us along the way home, Legion's spy could order our execution the

second we step into the Launch Bay. I think we need to consider our Great House off limits until Legion is stopped. The plan may be screwed, but we still have two working Shell Bombs. That's more than enough power to stop that metal demon! We just need a new plan to get them into place."

"What do you suggest?" Benton replies.

"I agree with you that Legion's on to our plan. She obviously knew about the Shell Bombs, and she probably knew we were planning to drop them in her path. She may even have a good idea of where... but I doubt she would expect an attack to come from underground." She pauses for a moment to see if Benton or Sweeper Long can see what she is hinting at. She was hoping to not have to make such a radical suggestion without a little support, but once she realizes no one else is willing to say it, she continues. "I say we grab the Badger, tunnel our way under the Factory Walker, and drop both Shells right under her feet. Nothing is better than the Badger at tracking a surface target from below ground."

Benton then points at the player characters and angrily says, "They aren't authorized to even know about it, much less go there. You shouldn't be bringing it up in front of them at all."

"The Senate trusted them with one of our greatest secrets. What's one more?!" she fires back. Shauna takes a moment to gather her thoughts and then says with a much softer tone, "Besides, we need help, and there's nowhere else for us to go. The traitor may know about the Lab, but I doubt they would expect us to go there. Even if they did, the facility is cut off from the underground haven. There's no way to get a message to them before we get there. We won't need to worry about any surprises. It's our safest choice. It's... our only choice."

The Archangel pauses for a moment, then lets out a sigh and replies, "I don't like it, but you may be right." Drake then turns to the player characters. "Congratulations, looks like we just raised your security clearance again. Hopefully, the Warlord doesn't execute all of us for showing you this, but at this point, I just hope he's still human."

Drake turns and starts walking back towards the Dracos transports while yelling to the Outriders, "Change in plans. We need you to drop us in *Bell Lake*, then head into the *New Eden Nature Preserve* and rendezvous at the *Fort Defiance Outpost*. Do not return home. Got it?"

The two Outriders hesitantly glance at each other for a second and then one responds, "All right, Drake. We got your back."

"I know you do. Thank you. OK, let's mount up."

Within minutes, the two War Mounts are streaking off towards Bell Lake. The player characters are familiar enough with the area to know the lake is only about five miles (8 km) to the west of their original drop point. Legion has long since stormed past the drop point and is now busily dismantling the Retro-Village of *Dillontown*. Off on the horizon, the players can see thick clouds of black smoke rising up from the doomed village. The Dracos transports are flying pretty low to the ground, but they are still high enough up to give the players a good look at the carnage. Fortunately, they are far enough away to spare them from the haunting screams coming from the hundreds of poor damned souls being culled together by Legion's Collectors. They also get a good look at the devastation that trails off for miles behind her forces into the distance. The group still has not decided where the new attack point will be, but the destruction left in her wake will make an easy trail for them to follow when they are ready.

The convoy reaches Bell Lake about ten minutes later, and the flying Stealth Archangel tells the Outriders to drop the Players and Sweepers off in the center of the lake. The Outriders still seem a little uncomfortable with the orders, but they slow down and allow the group to dive off into the still waters below. Archangel Benton takes the lead, diving in with wings tucked tightly, and starts swimming straight down towards the bottom of this deceptively deep lake. It may seem somewhat small on the surface, but this lake is actually deeper than it is wide. It is called Bell Lake because it is shaped like an upside down bell with the deepest point reaching nearly two thousand feet (609.6 m) below the surface. Some people theorize it was created years ago by a massive orbital bombardment from the Machine's weapon satellites (before they mysteriously went offline).

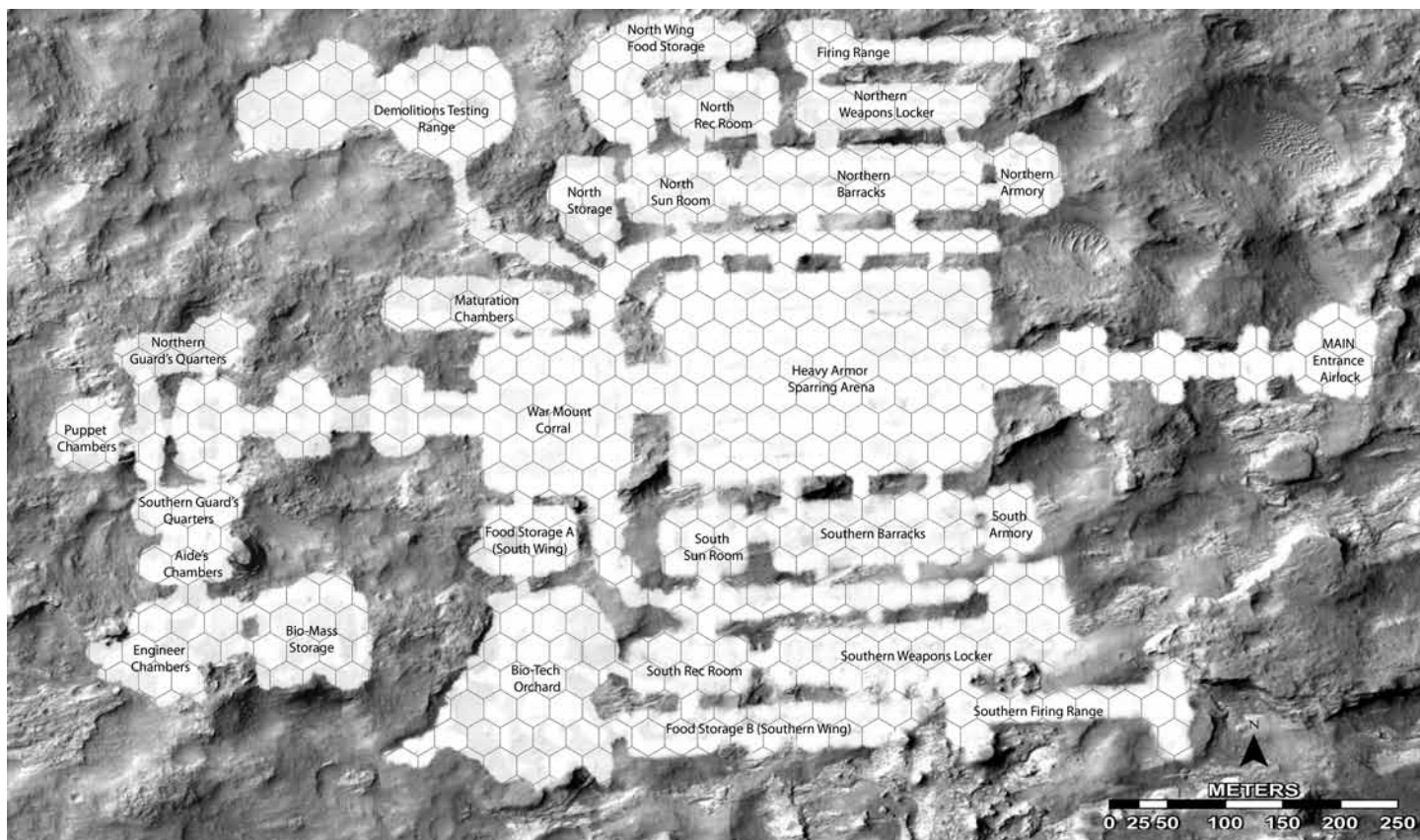
Visibility within the crystal clear waters is excellent even at the deepest point, so the players should have no problem keeping tabs on the Archangel. There are plenty of fish and small amphibious creatures swimming about, but nothing too threatening or large and everything seems to dart out of the way of the diving convoy. However, as the group continues to descend into the depths, the players start to feel the crushing pressure, even through their powerful Bio-Tech armor. The

Stealth Archangel does not seem concerned, and he keeps swimming deeper and deeper into the lake. Perhaps Benton's Nighthawk Armor can withstand greater depths than theirs. Just as they start to worry their armor may not be able to take any more, he suddenly changes direction and starts swimming towards a steep, rocky wall. As the group gets closer, they see a small, inconspicuous cave opening within the rocks. Drake turns to make sure everyone is still with him and then proceeds into the cave.

The cave is a maze of pitch black tunnels splitting off into multiple directions. Most of the tunnels are natural formations but others appear to have been carved out by hand. Benton seems to know his way through the maze well enough, but every now and then it takes him a moment to remember which fork to take. After navigating the tunnels for twenty minutes, the group comes upon an organic hatch that looks like an enormous heart valve. It is similar to the doorways found in large Bio-Tech creatures like the Kraken and Seedlings.

On the right side of the hatch is a large organic eye. Archangel Benton positions himself in front of it and casually waves his right hand like he is greeting an old friend. After a few moments, the three large flaps of the hatch open inward and the group passes through into the airlock. Compared to the cramped confines of the tunnels, the enormous airlock is a refreshing change. This large stone chamber is roughly cube shaped. It is about thirty feet (9 m) wide and thirty feet (9 m) across, but with





only a twenty foot (6.1 m) tall ceiling. Scattered throughout the rough rock walls and ceiling are dozens of organic glow cells that light up the room quite brightly (another refreshing change from the tunnels). Also scattered across the chamber are over one hundred strange, spiny organic pods. They look like basketball-sized Sea Urchins except each one has a single eye mounted in the center and a stubby, two-inch long tube just below the eye. There is a second hatch on the opposite end of the room and dozens of small vents along the bottom of the walls. Once the hatch seals behind the player characters, it takes less than a minute for the water to drain out through the floor vents. The group needs to brace themselves against the powerful suction as “something” quickly removes the thousands of gallons of water from the chamber.

After a few minutes spent standing around staring out the door into the facility, Anderson Long breaks the silence by saying, “It doesn’t usually take this long. What are they doing?”

“I kind of expected this. They don’t recognize everyone,” Drake Benton replies. “My guess is they’re gathering up more security and grabbing Martin so that he can scan them.”

The Archangel then turns to the player characters and says, “This facility is run by a *Puppet Master*, a new type of Splicer with a *Symbiote Armor* suit that provides the user mind reading abilities. They’re just one of the secrets that they grow and build here. One of many things you cannot tell anyone about.” He then chuckles slightly to himself and whispers, “Just to warn you, he’s a little weird looking so try not to stare.” This of course is coming from the man covered in a new, dark alien substance looking like a demon ninja with wings. “Now listen up! He’s going to read your minds to make sure everything checks out. It’s similar to the Librarian probing, but far less painful and without any headaches afterwards. Whatever you do, don’t resist and don’t try to hide anything. You’ll just look suspicious, and make things worse. If they have any doubts, they’ll gun us all down where we stand. I think once he gets the whole truth about Legion, he might be willing to help us. At least I hope so.”

The group has to wait another five minutes before the hatch to the facility finally opens. Two Dreadnaughts step into the room with their massive Harbinger Cannons trained on the player characters. They’re

followed by a large security contingent that includes four Bombardiers escorting a dozen Mantis Support Cannons, a Packmaster with five Gorehounds, ten more Splicers in Host Armor and five in Proto-Host Armors, and a very stern looking Biotic. The Biotic resembles a well-muscle man with tiger-like features adorned in insect-like armor plating reminiscent of a samurai warrior. The security team are all armed with various organic rifles that none of the player characters have ever seen before. The Biotic makes a few quick hand gestures and the security team fans out in a semicircle around the players. The Biotic is standing a few feet (0.6 m) in front of his people with his arms crossed and his cold stare cutting into the player characters like a dagger. From the looks of things, he seems to be the one in charge. Since Biotics are usually considered the lowest of the low in Splicer society, this instantly strikes the player characters as odd. Maybe this is the head of the facility that Drake was referring to. Sure, he looks a little unusual, but no more so than any other Biotic.

Once the guards are all in position, the Biotic orders the group to place their weapons and gear on the floor and step back ten paces. The Sweepers and the Archangel comply without hesitation. Drake Benton will tell every player character that has Gore Hounds, Black Talon Warhawks, Mantis cannons or any other War Mount creature to have them lie down on the floor. They are allowed to keep their armor, but the players should do their best to point any mounted weapons away from the security team.

When the group disarms, the two Dreadnaughts part slightly, and a human adorned in a sleek, dark violet wine colored, Light Body Armor with four black tentacles draping from his neck and back, steps through the line. Compared to the enormous Dreadnaughts, he almost looks like a child, but he is probably at least six feet (1.8 m) tall. His Light Body Armor is finely crafted and melds with a Mega-Damage silk, hooded cloak that conceals most of his facial features. At first, all the group can really see is his ghostly, pale white, almost translucent skin, but once he flips down his hood to get a better look at the player characters, they see what Benton meant by weird looking. His oversized head is completely hairless and somewhat egg-shaped and his eyes are totally black with no iris of any kind. His long, lean face is gaunt, almost skeletal in appear-

ance, and it is rather apparent, even through his Light Body Armor bulk, that his body is just as slender and frail.

He walks over to the Biotic, pats him on the back, and says, "Thank you, Isaac. I'll take it from here." He then looks back towards the player group and says, "Drake Benton, nice of you to visit us again so soon, but I must say it's a bit unexpected. I see your Nighthawk Armor is still intact and hasn't awakened yet. I'm impressed. It's been almost three months since you destroyed the last one. We may actually get to see how strong these things get when you give them enough time to evolve."

The player characters are surprised by his friendly, almost jovial manner. He speaks at a fast, energetic pace and he is rather expressive with his hands. For the head of a top secret weapons facility, he is a much more charming and likeable man than the players would have expected.

He then looks at the Sweepers and says, "Anderson, Shauna, lovely to see you both again as well. It's been too long." He then winks at Davies and says, "Shauna, I'm sure you're as lovely as ever beneath your armor. Hopefully we can get you out of it just to make sure." She dips her head and looks away slightly in response. The players can practically see her blushing through her Shellback Armor.

He then walks up to the player characters and looks them up and down for a few moments before saying, "Now, unfortunately I have not met your friends here before, and that poses a serious problem. You see, no one told me to expect new friends, which means they probably shouldn't be here. Now, I'm going to need a good explanation for why you've violated protocol or we'll have to kill you all right here." He suddenly gets a wide-eyed look of shock on his face and starts waving his hands frantically back and forth as he says, "Oh, it's nothing personal. It's just protocol. I swear." His reaction is confusing at best. He seems more concerned with not offending the players than with the likelihood of ordering their executions.

He steps a few paces away from the group then turns back around and says, "Now, I'm not in the mood to ask a lot of questions, so let's just take a peek inside those brains of yours and see what's going on here. Anyone want to go first?"

Drake Benton raises his hand and says to him, "I've got all the answers you need, Martin."

Once again, the man looks quite surprised. "Wow, I did not expect that. I thought you hated getting scanned, Drake. This must be serious. All right, you know the drill. Just try to relax and I'll make this quick. Show me what I need, and I won't have to dig deep. And please, how many times do I have to tell you, call me Marty."

"Just get on with it, Martin," Benton replies.

Martin frowns for a second in frustration. He looks over at the player characters and says, "He just always has to be difficult, doesn't he?" He then turns and walks behind Drake. Martin then closes his eyes in concentration and holds his hand out towards the back of Drake's neck. The players watch as wire-thin tendrils extend from his Light Body Armor's fingertips and start working their way through Drake's armor at the base of his neck. Drake grunts in pain for a few seconds as they burrow through his flesh and into his ears and spinal column, but once they find their mark, Drake suddenly seems to slump into a relaxed position as if he goes completely limp but is held aloft by the delicate tendrils. The veins at Martin's temples begin to pulse slightly. Within seconds, more large veins start visibly pulsing all across his bald head. His already alien appearance grows more and more disturbing with each passing second until he suddenly breaks out of his trance and says, "My God... whatever you need is yours." He then retracts the tendrils from Drake's neck, turns back to the Biotic, and tells him, "Your men can stand down, Isaac. Everything is fine. They're our guests, for now. I'll explain everything later, but right now, let's get them to the Northern Armory so they can give their gear a chance to rest and replenish while we talk."

The Biotic's already sour expression turns into an even bigger frown as he says, "Sir, with all due respect. I think you should scan the strangers as well. I understand the circumstances are likely extreme, but that's no reason to abandon all our protocols."

"Of course, Isaac," he somberly replies. "You're absolutely right. I'm sorry. It's just... it's just from the sound of things, I think we need to

hurry." He then turns back to the player characters and says, "OK, since we don't need to shoot you now, I hope that makes it a little easier for you to relax. It's much less stressful that way. We'll get this done quick and then we can get you out of your armor." He looks over at Sweeper Davies and Long and says with a wink, "I already know you two, so we'll catch up later, Shauna." As she turns away again, Martin whispers to the player characters, "I just love doing that. She gets so embarrassed. I think it's cute." It looks like the shock from learning about Legion and the infiltration of House Artemis has sunk in, and he is already back to his friendly and personable self.

It only takes a few minutes for him to scan the player characters. After each scan, he quickly reassures his people that his findings confirm what he already learned from Drake Benton. (Any player refusing to be scanned will escalate matters, creating heavy suspicions and the security team will not allow that player(s) to pass beyond this point until they comply. The longer a refusal drags out the more time that is wasted and Drake will remind the players of this.) When Martin finishes scanning everyone, he says to the player characters, "There, now we can be friends. Well, let me officially welcome you to the Lab. I know you've pretty much figured it out already, but this is one of House Artemis's secret weapon facilities. Our job here is to grow and test experimental Bio-Tech that may be too dangerous or too controversial to test back home. I know we're all in a hurry, but I think it would be rude if we didn't introduce ourselves. My name is *Martin Macalister*, but please, call me Marty. I'm the head of this facility." He then looks over at the Biotic and says, "That serious looking man over there is my Chief of Security, Isaac Mendoza. Yes, he is a Biotic, but we don't dwell on the silly traditions of the Resistance down here, so his mind is completely untouched and very brilliant I might add. Our job is to push the limits of Bio-Technology to see what it is really capable of doing and learning more about what it does to us. There's no room for hamstringing ourselves with foolish rituals just to keep the ignorant masses happy."

He then flips his hood back up and says, "It's a little too 'drippy' in here. What do you say we head into the facility and see if we can't get you what you need?"

The security detail heads through the airlock first, leaving only Martin and Isaac to escort the group through the facility. As they walk towards the airlock, Martin says to the player characters, "I must say, I'm surprised they assigned someone with such low clearance to this mission. You must have really impressed Warlord Artemis. I know your heads are just swimming from all of this, but don't worry, you're not alone. I promise we'll help you any way we can."

The hatch opens into a long hallway that slopes upward at a steep angle. Instead of the rough stone walls found in the airlock, every surface in this passageway is covered with a smooth coat of Mega-Damage resin. The sandpaper-like texture of the resin provides excellent traction for the steep climb. The players quickly notice the similarities to the heavily fortified hallways back home that lead to the Engineering Chambers. It is filled with the same four foot (1.2 m) tall resin barricades, and once again, each one has a large, white number painted on the back. While Senator Bane was not very forthcoming with their purpose, Martin is practically acting like a tour guide as he leads them through the hall.

"This facility is basically one giant defensive fortification. Every room, every surface was specifically designed to repel an invasion. The airlock is the lowest point in the complex and it's all uphill from there. That means our defenders always have the high ground advantage."

"Martin, what are you doing?" Archangel Benton asks in an incredibly irritated tone.

"What? They want to know. They're just too shy to ask."

"Maybe they're just smart enough to know they shouldn't be asking," Benton fires back angrily. "And maybe you should keep quiet and stop making the situation worse."

"Oh, you know I hate doing that," Martin responds with a wry smile on his face. "Besides, you'll all probably be executed for coming here anyway, so there's no reason for me to be rude." He then turns around and flashes a big smile at the Archangel and says, "Just kidding, Drake... well, probably. I figure if Warlord Artemis and the Senate trusted them

enough to give them two Shell Bombs, they will most likely let them live with this secret as well. Plus I'm hoping if you stop Legion, your little transgression will be forgiven."

"Me too," Benton replies quietly. After a few moments mulling over the situation, he lets out a deep sigh and says, "Fine, Marty. It's your show. Give 'em the grand tour."

"Well that is so sweet of you, Drake," Martin says with a sarcastic smirk on his face. He then pulls up an armored plate on his forearm and shows the player characters a large, plastic keypad strapped to his wrist. "All right, I know you're just dying to know what the big white numbers are. Well, those are codes that we punch into this. Each number marks the location of an explosive charge. Just type in the number, hit the trigger button three times... little safety feature against accidents... and boom. They're one of the key components to our defenses. Our people can use these barricades as cover from enemy fire, but if the enemy tries to use them, we just trigger the shaped charge in the barricade and the whole thing goes off in their face like a giant claymore mine. The passageways between rooms are also lined with explosives and marked with a number. It lets us funnel the enemy into non-essential sections of the complex and then collapse the passageways to seal them in.

"It's fantastic stuff. We can thank our friends at House Tarkov for these little babies. Bit of a cultural exchange. Our Bio-Tech may be leaps and bounds above their little plastic and ceramic toys, but we've never quite figured out how to make remote detonators. They're completely plague-safe, but I don't know, I just don't trust the old-fashioned stuff anymore. I don't really even like wearing it. I'd rather just leave it in my chambers, but Isaac insists that everyone wears one at all times. Guess that's what makes him so good at his job. If he wasn't wound up so tight at all times, we wouldn't be so well protected.

"Anyway, let's keep moving. We're going to head over to the Northern Armory and soak your gear, then we can take you over to the Badger. Ooh, you know what? While we're in the armory, we should set you all up with some new weapons. We've got some great stuff. I think you're going to love it. There's a firing range right next to it, so you can try out a few and see what you like. We always need more field test data anyway, and it sounds like you guys may just need a little extra firepower for this one."

(G.M. Note: Before going into the next room, if there are any players that are Technojackers and are in their Nanobot armored form or carrying any metal weapons or gear, Martin will insist "for their own safety" that they revert to normal now and either put away or leave their metal armament here, before entering into the next room. Any Technojackers that refuses will not be allowed to enter beyond this point until they comply.)

The group passes through a large rectangular room that bisects the hallway. On each side of the room are a half dozen Mantis Support Cannons partially concealed behind resin barricades. It is a similar setup to the defenses laid out back home except there are no human guards mixed in with the cannons, and the ceiling is covered with more of the large, sea urchin-like creatures. Martin explains that, "These 'kill rooms' are designed to catch invaders in a deadly crossfire of heavy artillery and a shower of spines and acid." He points at the urchins above their heads and continues, "The Spine Pods are one of our in-house creations. Each one holds about thirty gallons (113.5 liters) of acid and several hundred razor-sharp spines. What you see is just a piece of their bodies; the rest is grown right into the walls. That's why they have such an impressive payload. They automatically activate whenever anything metallic comes into range, but we can also order them to attack anything that moves with a simple verbal command. The Machine's not the only threat to us on this planet, so we need to be ready for anything. They've passed all our tests with flying colors, so they should be adding them to House Artemis's defenses very soon. Once they are secured within our House, we will open the market to the Great Houses within our Alliance. The profit margins will be pretty nice this year."

The group passes through two more of these rooms before exiting into an enormous chamber. It is about two hundred feet (61 m) long and

one hundred fifty feet (45.7 m) across with sixty foot (18.3 m) tall ceilings. Like the hallway, the entire room is coated in Mega-Damage resin, only this room has apparently seen some heavy combat. Every surface is covered in blaster burns, scorch marks, and fresh resin patch jobs to repair the more serious damage.

As the group walks through this area, Martin says, "This is the Arena. It's the main test site within the facility. This is where our people get to duke it out in full armor to see just how good our new creations really are. There's usually at least a few Splicers sparring in here twenty-four hours a day, but we had to pull them out today for the security detail when you arrived. I guess they didn't feel like sparring after that. That's too bad. It's always entertaining to watch."

He then points at the two narrow balconies about thirty feet (9.1 m) up the walls that overlook the Arena on each side of the room and says, "You can get a pretty good view of the action from the observation decks. They also make great sniping points during an attack. They're usually full too. We don't really have much else to entertain ourselves with down here. I figure as long as they don't do anything they can't heal from, there's no harm in letting them blow off some steam. We've got our own resident Saint, so you'd be surprised how far these little sparring sessions go sometimes."

They pass through a short, white-numbered passageway and into the facility's War Mount Corral. The group is rushing through on their way to the armory, but the player characters can see about fifty or so War Mounts. For the most part, they are the standard variety, but the players will also spot a handful of prototype creatures they have never seen before. Any Outriders or Packmasters among the group can drop their bio-beasts off here for feeding and care. Martin leads the group through another long, upward-sloping hallway, only this one is not riddled with exploding barricades. Apparently they are not heading into a vital area. They cross through another white-numbered passageway and into the crew's quarters. This large barracks room is filled with over one hundred double-stacked bunk beds. Most are the standard man-sized bunks, but the players notice off in the corner about two dozen gigantic beds. They are at least twelve feet (3.7 m) long and about six feet (1.8 m) wide. Space is a luxury in the Resistance and comfort is not exactly a concern on anyone's mind, so these giant bunks are probably meant for someone or something that fits them quite snugly.

The few dozen crew members in the barracks immediately stand at attention when Martin and Isaac enter the room. Isaac puts them all at ease with a gruff "as you were," and the group continues on their way towards the armory. Most of the crew is out of their armor, but it appears that a few are still wearing their Host Armor. Or are they? The player characters notice one of these enormous monsters lie back down in one of the giant bunks as the procession strolls through. It looks like Isaac and Martin may not be the only major human experiments in the Lab.

The group finally reaches the armory. Martin tells the player characters, "Just strip off your gear and put it all in the corner. My attendants will take care of the rest. There's a shower back in the barracks so you can wash off your wonder snot. We left some clothes in there for you as well. I'll have my people bring some weapons over to the firing range for you to test out. When you get cleaned up, just come back here and we'll head over.

"Oh yeah, one more thing. Our Engineer's backlog isn't too bad right now, so I thought we could squeeze in a few Bio-Enhancements for some of your weapons. One weapon from each of you shouldn't be a problem. Just pick your favorite." He then hands a stack of loose papers to Archangel Benton and says, "Here's the list of all the enhancements our Engineer has available. We've got all the standard stuff, plus a few house specialties. One enhancement each. Whatever you want." He then looks at the player characters and says, "Like I said, we're here to help. Now, go get changed. We've got a lot to do and absolutely no time to do it."

The group strips down in the armory and then walks through the barracks and into the bathroom. Getting naked in front of other Splicers is pretty unavoidable within the cramped conditions of the underground haven, so it is nothing new to the group. However, it seems the bashful

Shauna Davies is still uncomfortable with the concept. Although from what the player characters can see, she has nothing to be ashamed of.

Martin left a simple cotton crew uniform for each member of the group. Once everyone gets cleaned up and dressed, they return to the armory. Martin leads them through another door to the firing range. Isaac is waiting for them next to a long wooden table covered in dozens of rifles. At the far end of the firing range are a series of resin pillars with black humanoid and various machine silhouettes painted on them.

Martin sweeps his hand over the table as he says to the group, "This is just a small sample of what we do here. I want to reassure you that every one of these weapons either has passed or has nearly passed the testing phase and is just about ready for mass production. I promise you they are one hundred percent reliable. Plus these are also some of my favorite designs, so I just had to show them off. The Librarians really outdid themselves with these." He then picks up a large rifle, aims it down the firing range, and says, "Just check out this baby. It's an absolute leap in the science of Bio-Technology. Watch this." He carefully aims and fires off a single round at one of the targets on the range. He strikes the humanoid silhouette directly in the heart. An impressive shot, but it did not seem to do an impressive amount of damage to the Mega-Damage resin column. As if sensing the group's disappointment, Martin looks over his shoulder with his trademark wink and says, "Oh, that's not the cool part." He then fires off multiple shots from the hip while randomly waving the rifle back and forth. Every shot curves drastically in mid-flight and strikes the target at the exact same point. Unlike the first shot which barely registered any damage, these high explosive rounds rip the pillar to shreds in just a few hits..

Martin then turns back to the group with a smug smile and says, "Impressive, huh? The first shot was called a Shrieker round. It transmits a special Bio-Comm signal that the rest of the rounds home in on. It's the future of Bio-Technology and only House Artemis has it. Makes you proud, doesn't it? Well now, I didn't bring you in here to watch me have all the fun. Please, try them all out. Let me know which ones you like and we'll get them out of the armory for you. I don't want to weigh you all down too badly, so one each is probably for the best."

The players spend about thirty minutes on the firing range, which is more than enough time to get a feel for the power, range, and abilities of all these firearms. Game Masters, let the player characters look through the **Experimental Bio-Weapons** section to pick their new prizes. Each member of the group gets to select one weapon. On the NPC side, Drake Benton opts for a Heavy Bore Rifle, Anderson Long grabs a Bore Sidekick Rifle, and Shauna Davies picks a Shield Cracker Rifle. Once everyone makes their selections, Martin tells one of the armory attendants to grab their chosen rifles and place them with the rest of the players' gear. He then says to the group, "All right, enough fun. Let's go get what you came here for."

Martin and Isaac lead the group back down to the War Mount Corral, and then deeper into the facility as Martin continues with his tour guide act. "We're heading into the very heart of the Lab, the Engineering Chamber. When it comes right down to it, it's really the only room that matters. The rest of the facility was basically designed to defend the Engineer. If you thought security was tight before, you're going to be impressed with what we have back here."

Martin was not exaggerating. The hallway leading up to the Engineering Chamber is not only filled with more of the white-numbered resin barricades, but the walls, floor, and ceiling are also lined with numbers. The players notice that the number on the floor matches the number directly above it on the ceiling and the numbers that line up with it along the walls. They are spaced out every ten feet (3 m) along the corridor. Martin explains that if the enemy ever makes it this far, then the situation is pretty dire and they start collapsing the tunnels to buy time for the Engineer to be evacuated. He says that they do it in sections to "discourage" persistent invaders that keep digging through the rubble. This hallway also contains three kill rooms, only they are much larger than the ones they passed through earlier. The other startling difference is that all three rooms are completely filled with Mantis Support Cannons. There must be at least fifty of these enormous beasts crammed shoulder to shoulder

within each room. Martin orders them to "make a path" and the giant bugs press up against the walls and climb on top of each other to allow the group to continue through.

Once through the corridor, Martin leads the group into another barracks room. This one is filled with about twenty of the giant-sized bunks. Half the bunks are occupied by what looks like sleeping suits of Host Armor, plus another ten armored soldiers are sitting around playing cards. Once again, they all spring to attention once their superiors enter the room and are quickly put at ease by Isaac.

The group does not break stride and continues on into the next chamber. Once out of earshot of these monstrous warriors, Martin stops and says to the player characters, "I assume by now, you've figured out they aren't human, or at least not anymore. They're another breakthrough in Bio-Technology, but I fear one that the average person may not be ready to accept. We call them *Tempests*. They are some of the most powerful warriors the Resistance has ever produced, made from some of the bravest heroes I've ever known. Much like Saints and Skinjobs, they've sacrificed their very humanity to destroy the Machine, but these guys will never be welcomed home again. I hope, in time, they are at least tolerated like the Scarecrows and Skinjobs, but it still makes me sad to think how ignorant our brothers and sisters back home can be." He then gives another one of his wry smiles and says, "But you're not like that are you? Anyway, this room is the living quarters for the Engineer's Geneticists. They must all be helping out Engineer Dante next door. We don't really have any business in there, but we need to go through there to get to the Badger. Let's just rush on through and try not to get in anyone's way. I just wanted to warn you before we reached the Badger's den that it can be a bit of a moody beast at first, so just stay behind us and don't make any sudden moves. The Badger prefers the lights to be low so it may be a bit dark for you before your eyes adjust."

Isaac can no longer keep his discomfort with the entire situation to himself and he says to Martin, "Sir, I think I've been more than accommodating of these rather unusual circumstances, but I need to know why we're bringing these people to see the Badger."

"I'm sorry to have left you in the dark on this, Isaac. I meant no disrespect," Martin replied. "Honestly, I knew you'd be opposed to this, and I've just been trying to think of the best way to tell you."

Isaac's perpetually stern face grows even more hash as he says, "I'd be opposed to what exactly?"

Martin bites his lip and glances down at the floor for a moment as he tries to gather his thoughts. He then takes a deep breath, looks his old friend in the eyes, and says, "Isaac, House Artemis is in jeopardy. Humanity is in jeopardy. They have a chance... we have a chance, to make a real difference, but in order for them to complete their mission, they're going to need to take the Badger."

Isaac casts a vicious look towards the player characters and then angrily says to Martin, "Sir, that is absolutely unacceptable! Without the Badger, we would be unable to evacuate the Engineer in the event of a full-scale assault."

"Now Isaac, you know that's not true," Martin calmly replies. "We can just use your Tunnel Rat contingency plan. They may not be as fast, but they would get the job done just fine. Our friends here need the Badger's speed, power, and tracking abilities if they're going to stand a chance. You have to understand, I did not reach this decision lightly. This Legion personality could possibly pose a greater threat than anything we've ever seen, and she must be stopped. I'm not going to make this an order, old friend. I would never do anything to undermine the brilliant defenses you've created. If you don't think we could stand to part with the Badger, we'll think of something else, but we have to help them."

Isaac's infuriated expression does not change at all as he silently glares at everyone for what feels like an eternity before finally saying, "They have to take it out through the airlock. I don't want them digging a back door into the facility that circumvents our defenses."

Martin's worried look instantly transforms into a brimming smile. "Don't make me hug you, Isaac," he jokingly replies as he starts walking

toward the Biotic with his arms spread wide, but he is quickly blocked by one of Isaac's massive palms on his chest.

"That won't be necessary," he says in an almost friendly tone. For a second, it even looks like he might have the slight hint of a smile on his face, but it quickly shifts back to his usual sour look when he spots Drake Benton smiling at him.

"All right then. Let's go meet your ride."

Martin tries to usher the group through the Engineering Chambers as quickly as possible, but even Drake Benton and the Sweepers slow down a bit to marvel at the sight of the Engineer Dante and his attendants hard at work. Every one of them has been in the presence of an Engineer before (they had to in order to upgrade their equipment), but no matter how many times they see one, it never fails to fill each one of them with a sense of awe and reverence. The Gene Pools epitomize the benevolence of Bio-Technology, and the Engineers represent the most selfless aspects of humanity. These two beings merged together into one pure instrument of creation. The Engineers may grow weapons and other tools of destruction, but they never harm anyone themselves. They have sacrificed their humanity, even their overall mobility and freedom, for the good of the Resistance, and unlike their Librarian brethren, they do not scheme, they do not plot, they do not go Megalo, and they never act in their own self-interest. Even their appearance, while strange and alien, still has an almost angelic look.

The Engineer's eyes are closed in concentration as he gently sways his hands about as if conducting a symphony that only he can see and hear, which, in a sense, is somewhat true. Within the waters of the Gene Pool is a complex microcosm of thousands of organisms and tendrils that the Engineer must direct in perfect unison in order to assemble the genetic code for each Bio-Tech device on a molecular level. It requires a level of focus and concentration that is so far beyond human comprehension that it is impossible for them to express. Most Engineers just describe the process as "challenging" and then quickly return to their unending duties of supplying the entire Resistance with the means of humanity's survival.

Engineer Dante is so lost in his work, that he does not even notice the group enter the chamber. Several Geneticists along with two Homunculi and three specialized, Proto-Host Armor-clad assistants look up from their tasks momentarily at the intrusion, but then quickly return to their duties once they see that it is only Martin and Isaac. One armored assistant is chopping a large animal carcass into chunks and dropping the pieces into the Gene Pool while the other attendants remove completed items from the waters. One attendant is pulling out a seemingly endless string of firearms while another fishes a large man-sized cocoon from the depths of the Gene Pool. The Geneticists appear to be focused on reviewing the maturations and telling the Homunculi where to place the firearms. The player characters only recognize about half of the rifles from the ones they tested on the firing range. The rest are new experimental designs. Although they did spot a few of their own firearms. Apparently, some of their upgrades are already finished.

The players are all standing there just soaking up the scene when Isaac snaps them out of their daydreaming with an annoyed grunt and then motions for them to proceed through the nearby door to the Badger's Den. As soon as they step inside, the stagnant, muggy air hits them like a wave. The door then seals itself shut behind them, plunging the cavern into almost complete darkness.

The players can barely see the silhouettes of Isaac and Martin standing before them, much less anything beyond that. Their other senses quickly sharpen to compensate for the poor visibility, but the thick scent of death and the sounds of heavy breathing echoing from every corner of the chamber do little to ease their sense of dread. As the players' eyes adjust to the dim light, they can see the outline of what looks like half of a carcass of a Behemoth War Mount near the cavern wall. The dingy war-paint markings on the carcass indicate that it was from Great House Charlemagne, a bitter enemy of House Artemis. Isaac takes a few steps forward when a large, clawed hand suddenly flashes from out of nowhere, buries itself deep into the carcass, and drags the bloody piece of meat deeper into the darkness. Isaac does not seem phased for a second

and continues walking into the darkness as the sound of heavy breathing is replaced with the sounds of armor plates cracking, tearing flesh and crunching bone. Martin takes a few steps back towards the player characters, perhaps not out of fear, but rather to reassure them that everything is all right. He then softly says, "lights to one quarter" and the handful of organic glow cells throughout the room light up slightly. It is not much, but it is enough to pierce the darkness and give the player characters their first look at the Badger.

In the dim light, it does look like an enormous wolverine-like badger, but as Martin beckons the player characters to come closer, they notice the unique aspects that further demonstrate its Bio-Tech origins. What looked like a massive mane of hair from a distance are thick layers of overlapping bone spikes. Each bony "hair" is about the size of a human femur and they all come to a fine point. The beast's eight, powerful legs each end in wicked looking, six to ten feet (1.8 to 3 m) long claws. They are thick like natural claws to help the beast dig through the earth, but they also taper to serrated, razor-sharp edges on the underside to make them even more formidable in combat. The players can see that the creature's face is covered in blood from its recent meal, but as they look around, they cannot see any traces of the Behemoth carcass anywhere. That means the Badger was able to devour this thickly armored war machine, armor, bones and all, within seconds. Of course, it does not appear quite as fearsome at the moment as Isaac rubs its snout like a beloved puppy.

Martin spreads his arms out wide and proudly proclaims, "Meet the Badger! It's our state-of-the-art Subterranean Armored Personal Carrier (S.A.P.C.), one of our greatest creations! I know I say that a lot, but just look at it. It's absolutely magnificent. It has all the power and ferociousness of its tiny little brethren... in a somewhat bigger package. Did you know that even at a mere twenty to thirty pounds (9 to 13.5 kg), badgers and wolverines routinely challenge larger predators like wolves, leopards, lions, and bears for food... and win? Their durability, strength, aggression, and sheer tenacity allow them to wrestle prey away from adversaries twenty times their size. Truly amazing. The fact it took the Resistance this long to incorporate these little demons into the Gene Pools still astounds me.

"The Librarians designed the Badger to be a breaching vehicle. It can tunnel undetected beneath the enemy's defenses and fortifications and deliver a twenty-man, armored commando squad right into the heart of their strongholds. There's nothing in the Machine's arsenal that can prevent them from reaching their objective. Hell, even the other Great Houses wouldn't know how to stop them. Not that we'd ever use them for that." A hint of a smile crosses his face for a second before he continues on. "If it isn't obvious from looking at it, the Badger's much more than just a transport. Once it drops off its payload, it is more than capable of providing its commandos with some impressive close-quarters or long-range support. We, of course, have no need for an assault transport, so we use it for a somewhat different purpose. For us, the Badger is our last hope. When all else fails, and it's obvious the facility will be overrun, we pop the Engineer out of the ground and transport it, and hopefully a few other survivors, to a nearby sanctuary and then eventually, to the Artemis underground haven."

Martin then turns around and says to the player group, "I know your situation is serious, but I want you to understand what a serious predicament this leaves us in. We have other means to tunnel out, but only the Badger is large enough to safely transport our Engineer without harming him. It is a lot for us to risk, but I believe, just as you do, that it is a necessary risk. But please, bring him back to us as soon as you're done." Isaac walks over and says to Martin, "Sir, we should hurry. Take them to the armory to get suited up and I'll grab Hawkins and bring the Badger to the airlock."

"Thank you, Isaac. You have fun squeezing him through the tunnels. We'll meet you in the airlock in ten minutes." Martin glances over to the players and says, "Oh, by the way, Michael Hawkins is one of our best Outriders and he has developed the closest bond with the Badger. He knows how to get the most out of the Badger and he'll be absolutely invaluable on your mission."

Martin and the player characters double time it through the facility back to the armory. All their gear is refreshed, recharged, and ready for action. Even their new rifles and upgraded weapons are ready (all player Gore Hounds and War Mounts will also be brought to the airlock; refreshed, well fed and upgraded, if any). Everyone suits up and heads back to the airlock where Isaac is waiting with the Badger and a few unexpected surprises. It looks like Isaac grabbed some friends on his way through the War Mount Corral. The big Biotic is standing next to five heavily armed Outriders and their mounts. One of the mounts is a dark-emerald Skullcracker, but the other giant, mint-colored, leopard War Mounts are unknown to the players. They must be another in-house design. They have a more natural look than the heavily armored designs common to the Resistance Bio-Tech War Mounts. They look like normal animals, other than their enormous size of course. What is even stranger is that each Bio-tech panther does not possess a War Saddle. It is rather unusual, but at this point, nothing in this facility is really much of a surprise anymore. Martin seems surprised to see them as well. "What's all this, Isaac?"

"I realized they were going to need some air and heavy hunting support to pick up Legion's trail, and I figured since I was already in the corral, I might as well increase their odds of bringing the Badger back to us in one piece." This time, the smile on his face is unmistakable.

"Do you see why I love this guy? Thank you again, Isaac. Did you have time to tell them the particulars of this mission?"

"I did. They all understand the risks and the importance."

"Well then, thank you gentlemen for volunteering for this assignment. You are all doing a great thing today, not only for Great House Artemis, but for all of humanity. So what's the plan, Isaac?"

Isaac unrolls a large, hand-drawn map on the ground and takes a knee beside it. It shows Bell Lake and the land surrounding it for a six mile (9.6 km) radius. "Unfortunately, we don't know anything about Legion's current location, so all we can really do from here is make sure everyone gets topside safely without compromising the facility. The rest is going to be up to your team. The first order of business is to send the Stalkers and a Skullcracker to scout out the surrounding area to determine a safe rendezvous point. We don't get many Machine patrols in this area so it should be clear, but that's no reason to take any chances." He then looks up at one of the Outriders and says, "Cole, take the Stalkers and check out these sites here, here, and here. You'll set up 2 Receptor Mounds at each location. We'll designate them Alpha, Beta, and Charlie site. The rest of you load up in the Badger. It can't swim, so after it clears the airlock and reaches the bedrock, it will need to tunnel through. Once the Stalkers have determined which site is most secure, take the Badger to the surface and do what you can to pick up Legion's trail. From the sound of things, she shouldn't be too hard to spot. I would recommend traveling underground the rest of the way from there, but I'll leave the rest of the logistics to you. Any questions? Anything you want to add, Martin?"

"Just one thing for our new friends. I know you're not familiar with the Stalker War Mounts, but trust me when I say that just these four will be a tremendous asset for your mission. Not only are they Stealth Field equipped, but they're loaded with some of our greatest breakthroughs in Bio-Tech. Throw in the added bonus of some of the best Outriders in the Resistance and I can promise you are in good hands. Good luck and good hunting, ladies and gentlemen, I know you'll make us all proud, and I look forward to seeing you all again soon. Oh yeah, and drinks are on me when you get back."

He tries to hide his concern behind his trademark smile, but he tends to wear his emotions on his sleeve and he cannot hide his concern for everyone's welfare. In the short time he has come to know the player characters, he has already grown quite fond of them (one of the side effects of being a mind reader). As he and Isaac, along with several Dreadnaughts, walk out of the airlock, Martin glances back one last time with a look on his face like most of his friends will not be returning from this one.

The airlock seals shut and everyone starts loading up into their War Mounts. As the players head into the Badger, they watch the backs of the Stalker War Mounts open up and their Outriders slip inside. The Outrid-

ers take their time fastening their War Mount's neural interface tendrils into their host armor's helmets and the Stalkers snarl as they anticipate a hunt. Once each Outrider leans forward into their beasts, they grip the internal handles underneath the Stalkers' shoulder plates and the backs of their mounts close up, completely sealing each pilot within the body of their corresponding Stalker. Another unique creation from the Lab. The player group (and all of their War mounts, if any) squeeze into the Badger carrier and the hatches seal shut behind them. It is an incredibly tight fit within the Badger, but that is by design. The internal compartment molds around the occupants to keep them secure during transport and combat maneuvers. Fortunately, their Bio-Tech armor reduces the sense of claustrophobia. What also helps is the limited neurological connection formed between the Badger and its passengers. The compartment itself is completely dark and silent, but the Badger passes what it sees and hears back to its occupants. It keeps them in touch with the battle outside and prevents them from panicking while sealed inside.

Within minutes, the airlock fills and the outer hatch opens. The Stalkers push through the water with surprising speed and grace more akin to river otters, but the heavy Badger has to trudge along the ground at a snail's pace. Once outside the airlock, the Badger punches through the tunnel wall and starts digging. When the Badger reaches the river's walls, it knows its in its element. The War Carrier moves with impressive speed, even through such thick rock. After a few minutes, Hawkins informs the group that they are near the surface and will be holding position until contacted by the Stalkers.

It takes a bit longer than everyone expected before they finally receive a Bio-Comm transmission from one of the Stalkers. They inform Hawkins that Beta site is secure and they will wait for the Badger to rendezvous. They do not offer any explanation for the delay, but if asked, they say they had to wait for an unexpected Machine patrol to pass. When the Badger finally reaches the rendezvous point, the group learns the real reason for the delay.

A Horrific Reunion

The Badger breaks through the loose soil and surfaces in a large, open field on the edge of a dense forest. Through the eyes of the War Carrier, the players see the scene outside and instantly realize that they have stumbled into another Legion ambush. Surrounding them on all sides are dozens of the scorpion-like Collectors as well as nearly a dozen heavily armored humanoids (most likely cyborgs). The group also spots a few of these cyborgs concealed among the trees. They look similar to the aesthetic of Legionnaires except they are a bit smaller and more compact. Judging by their slither build and sneakier nature, it looks like they were designed for a purpose other than heavy combat. Perhaps the Legionnaires are the big bruisers and these smaller versions are scouts, assassins, or hunters.

Before they have a chance to react, the Badger is ensnared by dozens of carbon nanotube web lines. The War Carrier struggles briefly to free itself, but for every line it snaps, three more are applied. After a few moments, everyone can hear through their Bio-Comms the sound of half a dozen people saying in perfect unison, "Please, my children, calm yourselves. It would be such a shame to destroy such a majestic beast... or your friends here, or yourselves... You will all be much happier once you become one with me... Please, come out here. Don't be afraid."

At first, it is unclear who is talking and what "friends" they are talking about, but the Badger is able to turn its head enough to spot what looks like six Splicers standing among Legion's forces. Lying at their feet are three of the four Stalkers. They are bound and unable to move, but they seem unharmed. The state of the pilots, however, is still a mystery. Hopefully, they are just trapped inside their mounts.

Once the Badger gets a good enough look at the mysterious Splicers, the group gets a horrifying glimpse (Horror Factor 18) of what Legion means by "becoming one with her." Each warrior is a Frankenstein-like patchwork made up of pieces from an assortment of War Mounts, suits of Host Armor, and even human bodies. Some of these pieces are con-

nected surgically on such an elegant level that it almost looks like it grew that way naturally, but others are coupled together by a cybernetic joint with a sickly translucent piece of Mega-Damage flesh stretched across it to give the illusion of life. Bio-Technology may twist and mold life forms into often monstrous creations, but no one in the group (or the Resistance) has ever seen anything as hideous as the perversions that are standing before them now. For the player characters, it is even more horrifying because they recognize where Legion harvested the pieces. These six monstrosities were assembled from the House Deluvane strike teams that first helped the players attack the Factory Walker back at Harrisburg (see **The Rifter® #71/72, Episode One**). She not only used their Bio-Tech gear and War Mounts, but she also attached the heads and faces from some of the fallen warriors to add to the terrifying appearance of her creations.

It is unclear if all the pieces of these Bio-Tech Amalgams are truly functional, but one thing is clear, their Bio-Comms are working perfectly. Perhaps Legion's desire to convert humans into cyborgs was not just born out of insanity. Maybe her madness ultimately has a purpose after all. At the very least, she has achieved something her sister Machine personalities never could; she figured a way to hack into the Resistance's unbreakable Bio-Comms. She successfully removed one of the greatest tactical advantages that humanity had left. To punctuate the point, the

Amalgams once again say in perfect unison through their Bio-Comms, "Please, enough games. It's time to come out."

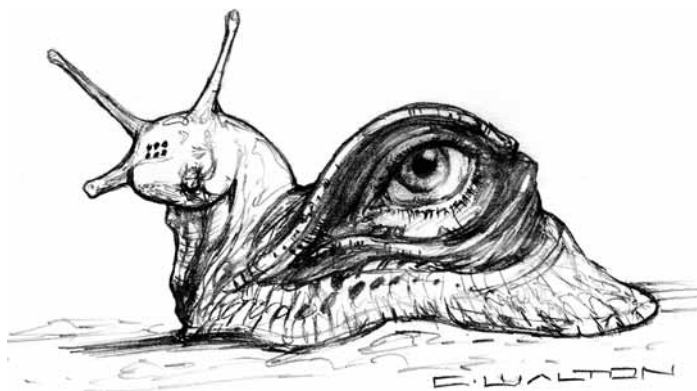
Suddenly, the walls of the internal compartment relax and expand, allowing the group to move around freely. The passengers glance around at each other in confusion when they witness Sr. Sweeper, Shauna Davies open the hatch and exit the Badger. The protection they were once afforded within the Badger is now gone due to the wide open hatch. Legion's forces quickly move in to secure this advantage. Two Collectors crawl up onto the Badger's back and grab hold of the hatch to make sure it cannot be closed again.

Drake Benton screams after her, "Shauna, what the hell are you doing?! Get back here." She doesn't respond or even look back. Benton chases after her for a few steps but stops when he realizes all the robots' guns are trained on him and none are targeting her. He tries to get her attention one last time, but she keeps walking towards the patchwork Splicers. Once she gets by their side, she turns around to face the players, then she, the Amalgams, and the rest of Legion's minions all say in unison, "Don't worry. She's with us."

To Be Continued...

I am Legion, Episode Three Adventure Source Material

New Bio-Enhancements



Eye Spy

The Eye Spy is one of the ultimate surveillance tools. It looks like an average-sized snail with a human eye mounted on its back instead of a snail shell. The organism can be grown anywhere on the armor, but most people like to place it on their back. The eye is fully functional, and the pilot of the armor can see everything it does. The basic version only has normal vision, but it can receive any type of visual Bio-Enhancement. The real power of the Eye Spy becomes apparent when the pilot plucks it off his body. A special built-in Bio-Comm continues to transmit the visual data back to the armor even when the two are separated. The pilot can see through this eye even when the two are 6 miles (9.6 km) apart. The organism can be placed on any surface and can move about on its own with a Speed Factor of 6. The pilot controls its movements through the same Bio-Comm link.

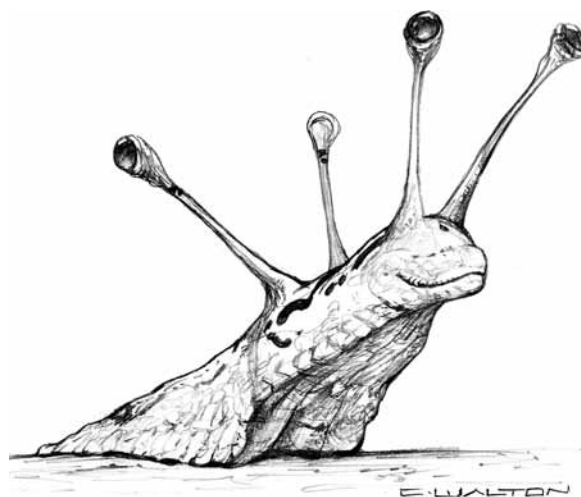
The Eye Spy is a part of the armor and can exist indefinitely while attached, but once it is removed, the snail-like creature can only live for one hour before it dies of starvation. Once the Eye Spy is removed, it cannot be put back. It can cling to the side of the armor, but it will still die after one hour. Fortunately, lost Eye Spies will regrow in the usual location on the armor after 3D8 hours.

M.D.C. of the Eye Spy: 4 M.D.C. points, but the Eye Spy is a very small target and is -4 to hit on a "Called Shot" when still located on the armor. The same penalty still applies when the organism is operating on its own. However, it is relatively easy to hit if targeted with an area effect weapon (no penalty).

Bonuses: +1 on initiative, +1 to parry and dodge, plus an Eye Spy located on the back of the armor makes it impossible for the armor to be attacked from behind.

Bio-E Cost: 25 points per Eye Spy.

Prerequisite: None.



Eye Trigger

Small, slug-like creature with four eyes pointing in four separate directions. When a robotic target gets within 40 feet (12.2 m) of it, it signals to Shrieker-equipped weapons or to assigned Receptor Mounds to bombard the area with fire. The Eye Trigger sends incredibly accurate coordinates so it is a precision bombardment and not just carpet bombing. Eye Triggers are meant to be disposable as payloads of them will regenerate throughout the week until they starve to death, though, they can also be recovered and fed before then.

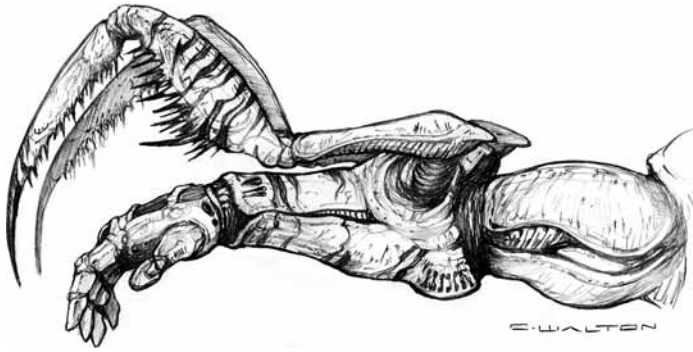
M.D.C. of the Eye Trigger: 6 M.D.C. points, but the Eye Trigger is a very small target and is -4 to hit on a “Called Shot” when on the armor or when the organism is operating on its own. However, it is relatively easy to hit if targeted with an area effect weapon (no penalty).

Payload: The Host Armor can reproduce a slug every 4D10 minutes.

Bonus: +1 on initiative.

Bio-E Cost: 40 points per Eye Trigger.

Prerequisite: None.



Mantis Blades

Mounted on the forearms of the armor are a large pair of Mantis Blades. Each weapon consists of a three foot (0.9 m) long, serrated blade attached to an articulated insect leg that can move in nearly any direction. The pilot controls the movement of the blades for the most part, but each leg also possesses a small neurological bundle that automatically moves the blades in conjunction with the pilot's actions to maximize the effectiveness of strikes and parries. It is difficult for opponents to adapt to the subtle movements of the Mantis Blades. Just a change of a few inches can mean the difference between an opponent's strike getting intercepted by the blades' defenses or the attacker's defenses being pierced by the blade. The legs are as articulate as fingers and surprisingly strong. They can tie up and incapacitate the toughest foes.

M.D.C.: 2D6x10 each.

Mega-Damage: 2D6 M.D. for a single blade strike or 4D4x10 M.D. per dual strike (counts as one melee attack).

Bonuses: +3 to strike and parry and +2 to entangle and disarm.

Bio-E Cost: 10 per blade.

Prerequisite: Forearm Mounted Bone Blades.

Bio-Enhancements: Mega Upgrade.

Ripper Maw

This unique enhancement can only be applied to Host Armors and War Mounts equipped with a functional mouth that can be augmented without interfering with the consumption and digestive capabilities. The normal teeth are replaced with three rows of razor-sharp, interlocking, shark-like teeth. These fearsome teeth can deliver devastating bites on their own, but the true power of this enhancement is revealed once the teeth start to move. The gums are modified with bands of powerful muscles that rapidly move the teeth back and forth to create the Bio-Tech equivalent of a chainsaw. Unlike a high-tech chainsaw, the Ripper Maw is almost completely silent (at least until it starts tearing its prey apart). Once the armor bites down, the chainsaw mouth completely shreds anything within it like a blender. When used against living targets, the Ripper Maw leaves a gruesome, gaping wound that is very slow to heal (heals at one quarter the normal rate).

Mega-Damage: 6D10 M.D.

Bonus: +4 to Horror Factor.

Bio-E Cost: 30 points.

Prerequisite: Only available to Carnivorous, Herbivore and Omnivore Host Armors and War Mounts.

Shrieker & Squealer Bio-Enhancements

Shriekers are large ammo slug rounds that emit a special Bio-Comm signal that other specialized bio-weapons, like Kamikaze Cruise Missiles and Mantis Support Cannons, can use as a targeting beacon. Shriekers are housed in Shrieker Launchers that are synced to the Pilot's or War Mount's Badger's eye movements, so they are always locked on target with whatever the Pilot/War Mount is looking at. The launchers are equipped with a safety mechanism that prevents them from accidentally firing into the body of its user. Once a target is tagged, the round transmits a special Bio-Comm signal up to a range of two miles (3.2 km). Any Bio-Tech weapon or device equipped with the proper receiver can then track this signal to its source and target it with incredible accuracy (even without line of sight).

Squealers are Bio-Tech spider-like devices that can remain curled up like a small bearing and fired from a weapon or they can be thrown where they open up with their eight spider legs splayed out to clamp onto desired targets. These devices emit specialized transmissions that can be used as a tracking and targeting source for Mantis Cannons, but may also be utilized by Splicers units that have Shrieker Hearing, Targeting or Tracking. Such units include Biotics, Gore Hounds, Host Armors, Living Body Armors, War Mounts and Special weapons that are equipped with a proprietary Squealer Bio-Comm (this is in addition to the standard Bio-Comm as a required prerequisite). Splicers can use these experimental devices to mark targets for special weapons firing and bombardment by Mantis Cannons. Once a Squealer is activated, all Mantis Cannons within a 10-mile (16 km) radius are able to track this transmission to its source and can accurately target it even without line of sight. This allows them to fire over obstacles or from a concealed position without ever seeing the target. It helps the Fire Teams maintain a low profile in the field, plus not having to rely on line or sight gives them a much greater field of fire. Note: Mantis Cannons have an innate desire to obliterate these Squealers once they hear the signal, but they will not fire until commanded to do so by their Bombardier.

Hear Shrieker Signals

War Mounts or suits of Host Armor can be equipped with a special Bio-Comm that enables them to hear the signal released by Squealers or Shrieker rounds. The pilot can track this signal to its source like a wailing alarm. However, this does not allow the pilot to target that source with any kind of accuracy. He can only determine the direction of the signal and estimate how far away it is.

Bio-E Cost: 5 points.

Prerequisite: None.

Shrieker Targeting

This enhancement is a step beyond simply hearing the signal from Shriekers and Squealers. It enables the War Mount or Host Armor pilot to visualize the exact location of the signal in space. This allows the pilot to perfectly target the signal even without line of sight, so even if a tagged enemy is completely concealed behind cover, he can strike as normal without any penalties. Of course, the pilot still needs a weapon that is capable of accurately firing over the obstacle.

Bio-E Cost: 10 points.

Prerequisite: Hear Shrieker Signals (this enhancement is also kept; it does not replace it).

Shrieker Tracking

Organic Rockets and Clinger Missiles can be enhanced with a special Bio-Comm that lets these living missiles track Squealers and Shrieker Rounds. They do not impart any additional bonuses to strike or dodge,

but they do enable the pilot to attack without line of sight on the target. The downside is that missiles with this enhancement will always go after a tagged target even if the pilot intended to strike something else.

Bio-E Cost: 2 points per Organic Rocket or Clinger Missile.

Prerequisite: None.

New Bio-Weapon Enhancements

Handheld Bio-Weapons

Bio-Force Field Emitter Spheres

Similar to the Bio-Energy Expulsion Vents, these larger, ribbed energy vents surround a blue-green sphere and are installed onto the forearms or shoulders of Host Armors or War Mounts. The Spheres are designed to channel stored Bio-Energy and natural neurolytic energy to generate a powerful, concentrated and focused, bio-electric energy field (3.5 foot/1 m diameter) as opposed to a full body field. While the field is extremely durable, it does take a considerable amount of time to recharge.

M.D.C. of the actual Bio-Force Vent: 6D6+40 M.D.C. points per Sphere.

M.D.C. of the Bio-Force Field: 1D8x10+60 M.D. is standard. If desired, the Bio-Force Field's M.D.C. can be increased by 25 M.D.C. per every additional 5 Bio-E points spent, up to a maximum of 250 M.D.C.

Penalty: If the M.D.C. of the Bio-Force Field is depleted, it can not be reactivated again for 5 hours. As long as the Bio-Force Field's M.D.C. has not been depleted, it regenerates lost M.D.C. at the rate of one point per two minutes (that's 30 M.D.C. points per hour).

Bio-E Cost: 15 points.

Prerequisite: None.

“Dancing Blades” Spear

This Bio-Tech long spear has a large, barbed spearhead on the tip and four insect-like legs mounted about 18 inches (46 cm) below that. Each leg ends with a long, thin spike that can punch through even the strongest armor. When the spear stabs into a target, the four spiked legs extend from the sides of the spear and stab the target over and over again in rapid succession. As long as the spear is in contact with the victim, the legs will continue to inflict damage. That is what makes this weapon somewhat unique to use. Instead of stabbing the target and then pulling it loose to strike again, the wielder keeps pushing forward in order to keep the target impaled so that the spike legs can do their work. Each melee action, both the wielder and the victim must roll a twenty-sided die to determine if the target stays impaled. The only bonuses that apply are any P.P. bonuses. High roll wins, ties go to the victim. If the attacker wins, the target stays impaled and the insect legs continue to stab again and again. If the victim wins, he breaks free of the spear. The number of melee actions both parties has available also plays a part. If one side runs out of melee actions first, then the other party automatically succeeds with each attempt until the round ends.

Weight: 9 pounds (4 kg).

Mega-Damage: 3D6 M.D. from the initial impact, plus 4D4 M.D. each additional melee attack from the rapidly stabbing insect legs until the victim can wrench himself free from the end of the spear.

M.D.C. of the Weapon: 120 M.D.C.

Trade Value: 4,000 credits, but limited availability.

Hive Sword

Locusts that devour metal or living tissue, armor, fur, etc. when they come into contact with them. The Locusts are contained on a backpack

sheath and the sword secretes an acidic nectar that burns into the item it has made contact with and draws the locusts into the target. The available Types of locusts are Metal Eaters and Hide Eaters. Hive Swords can only carry one type of Hive Locust as the two types are deadly rivals. If rival locust types come within an 8 foot (2.4 m) proximity range of each other, the locusts will immediately attack each other and attempt to invade the rival's hive in order to kill the rival's queen. The Hive Sword's hive can be mounted onto the hive of a Swarmlord and coexist with the Swarmlord's hive insects without conflicts. Insects can be washed out of wounds with water or heavy smoke.

M.D.C. of the Locusts: 1D6 each.

Mega-Damage: 4D6 M.D. for the large sword slash, plus the acidic nectar itself burns an additional 1D4 M.D. per melee round for 1D6 melee rounds. Once the nectar begins to burn into the target, the aroma of the nectar and burning fumes immediately draw out the locusts which begin to swarm around the sword and into the burning wounds, and begin consuming the target's burning and exposed wounded area(s), causing an additional 2D6 M.D. per melee round for 1D6 melee rounds (15-90 seconds) or until washed off.

Bonus: +4 to Horror Factor.

Bio-E Cost: 40 points.

Prerequisite: Only available to Carnivore, Omnivore and Lithovore Host Armors and War Mounts.

Penalties: The Hive Sword is a large, two-handed weapon and can only be held with both hands for Host Armors (otherwise, they are - 3 to strike). Only large War Mounts with a hand and opposable thumb like the Grendel or Silverback can wield it effectively with one hand.

Shrieker Launchers

These special launchers are typically mounted on the shoulder or the back of a forearm and resemble an armor-plated, foot long (0.3 m) lobster's tail. Each launcher is synced to the War Mount or Host Armor's eye movements, so it is always locked on target with whatever the user is looking at. Shrieker Launchers are equipped with a safety mechanism that prevents them from accidentally firing into the body of the Host Armor or War Mount. Once a target is tagged, the Shrieker round transmits a special Bio-Comm signal up to a range of two miles (3.2 km). Any Bio-Tech weapon or device equipped with the proper Shrieker receiver can then track this signal to its source and target it with incredible accuracy (even without line of sight). The Shrieker armor piercing rounds burrow deep into their target on impact, which often enables them to survive a substantial bombardment and still broadcast their tracking signal. However, there is a possibility with each strike that the tracking round may be destroyed. For every 10 points of Mega-Damage inflicted in a single strike, there is a 01-05% chance the Shrieker round will be destroyed. This applies to each individual attack; it is not a cumulative total. For example, a Steel Trooper marked with a Shrieker round is hit with a volley of Organic Rockets and suffers 58 M.D. There is a 01-25% chance the round is destroyed (round down, in other words 5 x 05%). The attacker rolls a 44 on percentiles, so the round survives. This means the attacker can still target the Shrieker round. He fires again and inflicts another 88 M.D., so now there is a 01-40% chance that the round will be consumed in this second attack. No matter how much damage is inflicted, the highest possible percentage is 98%. When the target is destroyed, the round is automatically destroyed as well.

M.D.C. of the Shrieker Launcher: 1D4x10+25 M.D.C. points per launcher.

M.D.C. of the Shrieker Slug Round: 1D10 M.D. each.

Range: 1,000 feet (305 m).

Mega-Damage: 1D4 M.D. per Round.

Rate of Fire: Each shot counts as one attack per melee.

Duration: Once activated, a Shrieker round will broadcast its Bio-Comm signal for 4D6 minutes before it starves to death.

Bonuses: +4 to strike.

Payload: 10 Shrieker rounds per launcher (20 total). Each spent round is regrown every 4D6 minutes.

Bio-Tech Explosives

Bug Bombs

The success of the Swarm Lord Program (see **The Rifter® #51**, pages 30-40) has inspired many Librarians to further experiment with these powerful Bio-Tech insects. One Librarian from House Artemis took some of the most voracious bugs known as Locusts and created powerful, new anti-personal grenades he called Bug Bombs. They consist of a simple shell that contains dozens of Locusts held in stasis with a low-grade explosive in the center of the bomb. The explosive itself is completely harmless (light S.D.C. damage). It is meant to awaken the bugs and send them flying in all directions within a radius of ten feet (3 m). The Locusts then land on any nearby metallic object within range and eat until they burst. The best part about these grenades is that they are completely harmless to living creatures. The Locusts are genetically programmed to be repulsed by the taste of flesh, so even if someone detonates a Bug Bomb in his hand, the Locusts would only seek out and destroy robots and other metallic debris. To activate the internal charge and detonate the bomb, the wielder just squeezes a small nerve cluster on top of the device. The user then has four seconds (one melee attack) before the bomb detonates. He can either throw it, or hold on to it to clear out the immediate area. Each Locust insect is like a voracious flying piranha, light brown with dark green accents, has 2 M.D.C., can inflict 1D4 M.D. per melee round for 1D4 melees, fly a maximum flight speed of 80 mph (128 km) with combat bonuses of +5 to strike and +3 to dodge.

Weight: Half a pound (0.23 kg).

Range: 100 feet (30.5 m) when thrown as a grenade (200 feet/61 m for Splicers). If attached to an arrow or spear the range is that of the projectile reduced by 30% due to the extra weight and imbalance of the Bug Bomb on the tip.

Mega-Damage: 3D4 M.D. per melee round for 1D4 melees to any robot or metallic object within a 10 foot (3 m) radius. Note: There are only enough Locusts within each Bug Bomb to affect five robots. In the alternative, if the Bug Bomb is thrown onto a large robot like an Assault Slayer or Battle Track, then the damage is 3D8 M.D. per melee round for 1D4 melees.

Trade Value: 2,500 credits each (experimental with limited availability).

Mega Bug Bombs

These larger bombs are about the size of a basketball. They contain about four times as many Locusts as the standard Bug Bomb, plus it has a larger charge in the center of the bomb to spread the bugs farther. They are too large and unwieldy to throw very far, so they are most often used in close combat.

Weight: Four pounds (1.8 kg).

Range: 40 feet (12.2 m) when thrown as a grenade (80 feet/24.4 m for Splicers).

Mega-Damage: 3D6 M.D. per melee round for 1D4+1 melees to any robot or metallic object within a 20 foot (6.1 m) radius. Note: There are enough Locusts within each Bug Bomb to affect 2D4+6 robots. In the alternative, if the Bug Bomb is thrown onto a large robot like an Assault Slayer or Battle Track, then the damage is 6D8 per melee round for 1D4+2 melees.

Trade Value: 6,000 credits each (experimental, with limited availability).

Protective Bug Bomb

This experimental grenade uses the same basic design as the offensive Bug Bomb, but instead of Locusts, this grenade is filled with dozens of Impact Beetles. When detonated, the bugs fly to the closest object (whether living or not) and activate their force fields. Most users detonate the grenade in hand (light S.D.C. damage) so the bugs swarm all

over them to create a form-fitting protective field, but this grenade can be used to apply a force field to virtually anything. The only problem is that most people are uncomfortable with Hive Insects crawling across their skin, and will often panic. Unless the recipient of the bugs rolls a 10 or higher to save versus Horror Factor, he will panic and brush off the protective insects. The bugs can project their field for 3D4+10 minutes before their energies are depleted and they fly off to die. The Impact Beetles die one melee round later and quickly decompose into sludge. Each Impact Beetle insect is solid black, has 2 M.D.C., can inflict 3D6 M.D., with a maximum range of 1,500 feet (457 m), fly normally at 60 mph (96 km), but can reach speeds of Mach 2 (1,552 mph/2,483 km) when attacking a target and has combat bonuses of +6 to strike and +2 to dodge.

Weight: One and a half pounds (0.68 kg).

M.D.C. of the Force Field: 3D4x10 M.D.C. The bugs die off as the M.D.C. is depleted or when their energy levels are depleted 3D4+10 minutes later.

Range: 100 feet (30.5 m) when thrown as a grenade (200 feet/61 m for Splicers). If attached to an arrow or spear, the range is that of the projectile reduced by 30% due to the extra weight and imbalance of the Protective Bug Bomb on the tip.

Trade Value: 3,000 credits each (experimental, with limited availability).

Scutigera Mobile Migs

The Scutigera, dubbed “Scurry,” is a modified Mig with up to 15 pairs of long, multi-articulate, hairy legs, which enable the Mobile Mig to reach surprising speeds running across floors, up walls and along ceilings. It is a dark yellowish-gray and has four dorsal stripes running down its length, and black striped legs, giving it the appearance of a giant centipede. When the Scutigera Mobile Mig is at rest, it is not easy to tell its front from its back.

Weight: One pound (0.45 kg).

Range: The Mobile Mig can travel at 50 mph (80.4 km) up to 1500 feet (457.2 m) before it gets too tired and stops to rest for 1D4 hours, before running after its target again. Its maximum range is one mile (5,280 feet/1.6 km) and then it will automatically detonate. However, it will likely detonate long before this occurs (45% chance every 1,500 feet/457.2 m). They can also be thrown like standard Migs for about 40 feet (12.2 m; double for Splicers).

Mega-Damage: 1D8x10 M.D. to a 12 foot (3.65 m) radius.

Trade Value: 2,000 credits, but limited availability.

Ranged Bio-Weapons

Acid Seed Cannon

This cannon fires a hollow seed round filled with a powerful acid. The acid is devastating to metals and other inorganic material, but is relatively harmless to humans. The hollow round is more likely to shatter on impact than other seed rounds, but on a positive note, the explosive impact sprays a 10 foot (3 m) area with a fine corrosive mist.

M.D.C. of the Seed: 4D4 each.

Range: 3,800 feet (1,158 m).

Mega-Damage: 4D8 from the seed round. If the seed does not pierce the robot's armored shell, the round shatters on impact and creates a fine mist of powerful acid. Everything within a 10 foot (3 m) area suffers 1D8 damage per melee round for 1D4 melees. The acidic mist only inflicts 1D4 S.D.C. to organic tissue. If the attacker rolls a Natural 20 (or 24 or higher with strike bonuses, or only 17 or higher if the M.D.C. of the Main Body has been reduced by 50 percent), the seed round punches straight through the external armor and releases its acidic payload directly into the internal circuitry of the robot. This inflicts an additional 5D8 damage every melee round for 1D4+1 melees. The melted circuits and components will impair the robot's motor functions until the damaged

systems can be repaired or rerouted. The robot loses one attack per melee and is -2 to strike, parry, and dodge for 1D4 melee rounds.

Note: The seed round will not open if fired into an organic target.

Duration: The acid burns for 1D4+1 melee rounds.

Rate of Fire: Each shot counts as one attack per melee.

Payload: 15 seed rounds. The Host Armor can produce one replacement seed round every 2D6 minutes.

Bonus: +2 to strike.

Bio-E Cost: 50 points.

Prerequisite: None.

Sniper Note: Characters that possess the Sniper skill are more likely to successfully puncture a robot's armor with a seed round. If the character rolls a Natural 18, 19, or 20 (or 21 or higher with strike bonuses, or only 16 or higher if the M.D.C. of the Main Body has been reduced by 50 percent), the seed round punctures the target's outer shell and begins damaging the robot's internal cavity.

Annihilator Cannon

The Annihilator Cannon is a heavy support weapon designed to be used by un-augmented infantry soldiers. When not in use, the cannon looks like a thirty gallon (113.5 liters) bucket made of muscle and bone mounted on four spindly insect legs. It can walk behind its user at a pretty decent pace like a loyal pet, but it is not really meant to operate on its own. To use the cannon, the gunner mounts the weapon on his chest with two of the legs wrapping over his shoulders to secure it in place and the other two legs bracing on the ground in front of the gunner to help with the weight. One would think that this massive weapon would severely limit mobility, but the support legs allow the user to move and fire with surprising agility. The cannon fires an experimental type of energy blast similar to the one used by the Omega Blaster. Its destructive power is incredible, but so far, the Librarians have had difficulty stabilizing the power supply.

Weight: 45 lbs (20.3 kg).

M.D.C. of the Rifle: 3D4x10+30 M.D.C.

Range: 3,000 feet (914 m).

Mega-Damage: 3D4x10 M.D. per blast.

Rate of Fire: Each blast counts as one melee attack.

Payload: Variable, determine payload every hour. After the first blast is fired, roll 2D12 to determine the cannon's payload for the next hour. At the end of the hour, the cannon's payload regenerates completely and the power core tries to reset itself.

Abilities When Operating Independently:

Running: 15 mph (24 km), Leaping: 5 feet (1.5 m) high or across. Swimming: Not possible.

Equivalent (Instinctive) Skills of Note: Climb 50% and Prowl 30%.

Trade Value: 30,000 credits, but limited availability.

Clinger Missile

An Organic Rocket can be further enhanced into a Clinger Missile. The small protruding point of the Organic Rocket evolves to look like an upside down starfish. These starfish-like pseudopods allow the missile to lock tight against any surface. The Clinger Missile tracks down and rams into its target at full speed, adheres to it with its pseudopods, and then a millisecond after attaching to its target, it detonates. Unlike standard Organic Rockets, the unique design of the Clinger Missile directs the majority of the explosive force inward like a shaped charge. This drastically increases its destructive power, but it does decrease the blast radius. In the center of the pseudopods is the same neurological bundle and eye that is found in the Organic Rocket, so the Clinger Missile can also continue to track down its target if it misses. However, the pseudopods decrease the aerodynamics of the missile, so it is not quite as maneuverable as a standard Organic Rocket. The Clinger Missile has one attack per melee and bonuses of +4 to strike and dodge, until it strikes its target, is shot down, or until it dies within 2D4 melee rounds after being launched.

M.D.C. of the Rockets: 13 M.D.C. points, but the missile is a small target and is -3 to hit on a "Called Shot" when still located on the Host Armor. After launching, each missile is treated the same as a high-tech mini-missile and can be shot down as normal.

Range: One mile (1.6 km).

Mega-Damage: 8D10 per individual missile fired, with a blast radius of 5 feet (1.5 m). The directed blast has a 20% chance of temporarily scrambling a robot's internal circuitry. If this occurs, the robot is stunned for 1D4 melee rounds, loses one attack per melee round, and suffers penalties of -2 to strike, parry, and dodge. **Note:** The chance of stunning the robot is increased by 5% for every additional Clinger Missile in a volley.

Rate of Fire: One at a time or in volleys of 2, 4, 6 or up to the number located on that particular Host Armor. Whether a single missile or an entire volley is fired, it counts as one melee attack. Roll once to strike, either all the missiles in the volley hit or they all miss.

Payload: Based on the number of Organic Rockets enhanced into Clinger Missiles. It takes 6D6 hours to regrow spent missiles.

Bonuses: +4 to strike and dodge, as noted above.

Bio-E Cost: 8 points per Clinger Missile.

Prerequisite: An Organic Rocket, which transforms (grows) into a Clinger Missile.

"Eye-See-You" Self-Propelled Grenade

These smart grenades are basically miniature Organic Rockets, and just like the larger rockets, each grenade possesses a single eye and a neurological bundle that allows it to independently track its target. To launch the grenade, the user must first attach the two foot (0.6 m) long tentacle to his temple to link with the device. This allows the user to see through the eye mounted on the grenade (at least while linked). He then points the eye at the desired target and sends a mental signal to confirm the target. Once the grenade is "programmed" with its objective, the user then yanks the connection tentacle from the grenade and it rockets off towards its goal. The grenade will continue to track down its prey until it strikes its target, is shot down, or until it dies within 2D4 melee rounds after being launched. It has one attack per melee and bonuses of +5 to strike and dodge.

Weight: Half a pound (0.22 kg).

Range: 100 feet (30.5 m) when thrown as a grenade (200 feet/61 m for Splicers) or about 2,800 feet (853.44 m) when tracking a target.

Mega-Damage: 5D8 M.D. to an 8 foot (2.4 m) radius.

Trade Value: 1,400 credits, but limited availability.

Glimmer Guns

Mounted on each shoulder of the Host Armor or War Mount are a pair of experimental organic energy cannons called Glimmer Guns. They get their name from the brilliant stream of blue energy pulses they unleash. Observers have described it as a shower of blue sparks shot from a fire hose. This effect is achieved when the dozens of smaller barrels within each cannon fire their tiny energy "packets" of Bio-Energy in rapid succession. These energy packets explode on contact, causing tremendous damage. Each individual barrel is somewhat inaccurate, but the weapon unleashes such a tremendous amount of fire that it does not matter. In fact, most users prefer this little flaw since it causes the energy blast to affect a larger area.

Range: 2,600 feet (793 m).

Mega-Damage: 6D8 M.D. to a 5 foot (1.5 m) area for a single burst, or 2D4x10+20 M.D. to a 10 foot (3 m) area per dual burst from both cannons.

Rate of Fire: Each burst counts as one melee action. Dual burst attacks from both cannons also counts as one melee attack.

Payload: Effectively unlimited.

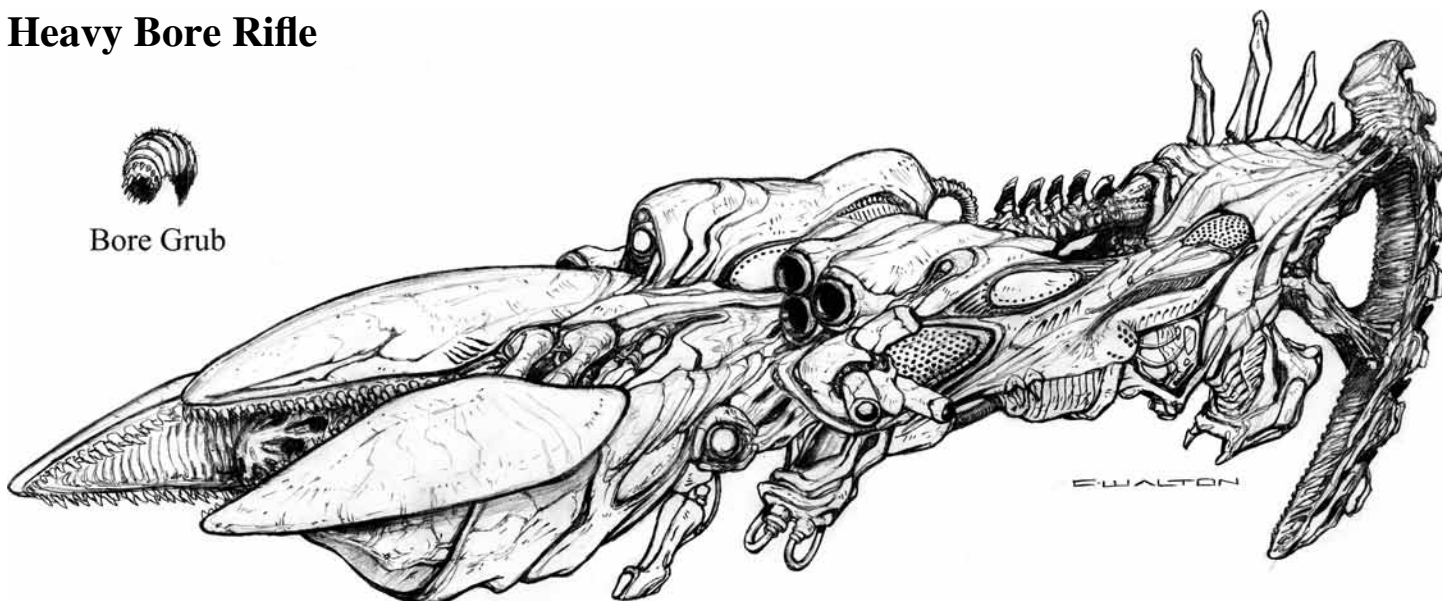
Bonuses: None.

Bio-E Cost: 45 each.

Heavy Bore Rifle



Bore Grub



This heavy support weapon is a larger, more powerful version of the Bore Rifle. The oversized ammo drum mounted on the underside of the weapon carries more Bore rounds than standard rifles even though each grub is larger.

M.D.C. of the Bore Rifle: 1D4x10+65 M.D.C.

M.D.C. of the Grub: 1D10 M.D.C. +4.

Weight: 25 lbs (11.2 kg). Most humans must use two hands to aim and shoot the weapon, otherwise they are -4 to strike. Individuals with Splicer P.S. of 24 or higher can fire the weapon with one hand.

Range: 1,800 feet (548.6 m).

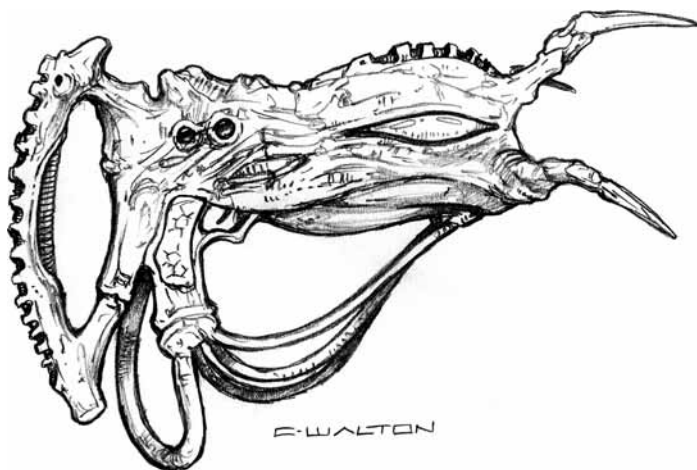
Mega-Damage: 2D10 M.D. for each grub fired from the rifle. The Bore round does an additional 1D10+3 M.D. for the next 1D6 melee rounds after it hits a metal target.

Rate of Fire: Each shot counts as one melee attack.

Payload: The Heavy Bore Rifle has a payload of 24 Bore Rounds. The Bio-Weapon can produce one replacement grub in only 3D6 minutes to replace the last round fired.

Bonus: +1 to strike on a carefully aimed shot only.

Trade Value: 12,000 credits.



Leecher Rifle

The Leecher Rifle is an experimental weapon that builds upon the energy-swapping technologies developed for Bio-Energy weapons. However, instead of tapping into the strength of the wielder, the Leecher Rifle was designed to steal the strength from an opponent to empower the rifle, forcing the target to weaken. Once the four front-mounted spikes are stabbed into the target like a bayonet, the wielder can attempt to make a draining attack (counts as a melee attack). Living targets can attempt

to make a save of 14 or higher against this attack (P.E. bonuses apply). On a failed roll, a massive amount of Bio-Energy is siphoned out of the victim and into the rifle. The target (whether S.D.C. or M.D.C. based) is weakened for 2D4 melee rounds. His P.S. and P.E. are reduced by half, he loses two attacks per melee, and suffers penalties of -4 to strike, parry, and dodge. Additional draining attacks do not increase the penalties, but they do increase the duration of the affect. On the flip side, the siphoned energy drastically increases the power of the rifle. 10 high-power blasts are added to the payload of the rifle (even if this increases the payload over the usual maximum), range is increased by 50 percent, and each blast receives a damage bonus of +20 M.D. The increased power lasts for 20 blasts or 1D4 melee rounds, whichever comes first.

Robotic opponents cannot resist, but the effects are not quite as powerful. The sudden energy drain does affect the robot's internal systems, but for a duration of only one melee round. The range and damage of all of the robot's energy-based weapons are reduced by half, it loses one attack per melee, and suffers penalties of -3 on initiative and -3 to strike, parry, and dodge. The Leecher Rifle cannot funnel this stolen power as easily as Bio-Energy so it only receives bonuses of +10 M.D. to damage and an additional 5 high-power blasts. The increased power lasts for 15 blasts or 1D4 melee rounds, whichever comes first.

Weight: 7 lbs (3.2 kg).

M.D.C. of the Rifle: 2D4x10+20 M.D.C.

Range: 1,800 feet (549 m).

Mega-Damage: 3D6 M.D. per bayonet attack. 1D8 M.D. per lower power blast, 4D8 M.D. per high-power blast. Both types of energy blasts can also be further empowered by a successful leech attack.

Rate of Fire: Each shot counts as one melee attack.

Payload: Effectively unlimited for the lower power blasts. The rifle can naturally generate and store 15 high-power blasts, but it can store additional high-power blasts after a successful leech attack. Spent blasts are recharged a rate of 1D4 every minute.

Bonus: +1 to strike.

Trade Value: 36,000 credits, but extremely rare.

Receptor Mounds

These special devices are Shrieker or Squaler-triggered mini-weapons platforms that are used to secure an area, establish a protective perimeter, set traps or to weaken incoming enemies. Receptor Mounds resemble large, 60 pound (27 kg) mushrooms with two pair of snail-like eyes and bio-organic ports across the top of its cap. The only exceptions are the Energy Beam Mound and Rocket Mound which have Super Light Cell clusters or protruding Organic Rocket tips instead of the ports. For the most part, the mushroom's cap operates like an umbrella by protect-

ing the gills and spores that are just below the cap from being damaged or contaminated. It takes only 2D4 melee rounds to plant or replant a Receptor Mound. They can be planted into any dirt or rock surface that provides minerals, as long as they can breathe oxygen (including underwater), and can be fed 5 pounds (2.25 kg) worth of dead plant matter a day. They will die after 7 days if not fed. If a Receptor Mound is planted in a forest, jungle or heaven forbid, a Gardener's garden, it automatically begins to gorge on the plant material surrounding it, up to a 10 foot radius (3 m) despite being fed regularly. There are four basic Receptor Mound types, each possessing its own unique discharge capabilities.

1. Hive Mounds: Hive Mounds resemble large, honeycombed hornets' nest, resting atop of a large mushroom that are home to 6D10+15 Hive Insects, which are the same species used by the Swarm Lord O.C.C. (see **The Rifter® #51**, page 30). They can attack in swarms (2D10 swarm) for a range of 1,200 feet (366 m). The available varieties are: Locust, Fire Flies, Stinger, Flybys, Lightning Bugs, Impact Beetles and Weavers.

2. Energy Beam Mounds: These Receptor Mounds contain clusters of Super Light Cells (3D10x10) spread randomly across the mushroom cap. The Super Light Cells produce beams of pure white light that do full damage even to laser resistant armors (it's not a true laser). Each cell delivers 1D10 M.D. and the Receptor Mound can fire one light cell or all of them in a single volley up to an effective range of 1,000 feet (305 m) as long as the target(s) are in direct line of sight of the cells. However, due to it requiring a direct line of sight on a target, they are also harder to conceal and are usually placed in high places like in a ruined building or hilltop. As a bonus, they are far more accurate (+3 to strike), with an effectively unlimited payload. Machine forces typically bombard these whenever possible.

3. Rocket Mounds: These are easy to identify as they have (2D6) organic rocket tips protruding out of the cap, and they fire organic rocket rounds at Shrieker-lased targets. Each rocket is like an organic version of a technological missile or rocket propelled grenade with its own independent neurological bundle (similar to a tiny computer brain) and a single eye mounted in the nose of the rocket for seeing and tracking its subject independently. This provides each of the organic rockets with one attack per melee round, as well as a bonus of +5 to strike and dodge, until it strikes its target (and is destroyed), is shot down and destroyed, or until it dies within 2D4 melee rounds after being launched by the Rocket Mound. Each organic rocket has 11 M.D.C. and is -3 to hit on a "Called Shot," while still lodged in the mound. 5D10 M.D. with a blast radius of 10 feet (3 m) is delivered per individual rocket and each has an maximum effective range of one mile (1.6 km). Rocket Mounds can discharge Rockets one at a time or in volleys of 2, 4, 6, 8 or all rockets at once. It takes 6D6 hours for a mound to regrow spent rockets.

4. Burner "Volcano" Mounds: These weird receptor mounds are ideal candidates of destruction towards machine and rival Splicers. The Burner Mound looks like a decaying fungus mushroom with multiple (2D4) large craters resembling miniature volcanoes scattered across the cap. Inside each crater however is a Burner nozzle that projects the sticky, bio-napalm that can consume an average robot or drone in a matter of minutes. Only by wiping the matter off can the target hope to survive. A bio-napalm burst does 3D8 M.D., but a concentrated plasma burst (counts as two melee attacks/actions) does 1D8x10 M.D. and can cover up to 10 feet (3 m) with each attack, up to 40 feet (12.2 m) of diameter for four attacks with everyone in the affected area taking 2D8 M.D. Additionally, any target that is hit by the bio-napalm will continue to take 2D8 M.D. of damage every melee round for 2D4 minutes. The only way to save oneself from the damage is to roll in dirt or sand (water will not extinguish the bio-napalm) for one entire melee round (15 seconds), until the bio-napalm is rubbed off. A Burner Mound can deliver plasma bursts either one at a time or multiple burst volleys of 2, 4, 6 or all, up to a maximum effective range of 100 feet (30.5 m). The Burner Mound stores enough napalm for up to 40 attacks and can target multiple targets at the same time. Each mound can reproduce its entire reservoir payload in 2D10 hours. The mound itself will not burn from the bio-napalm as it secretes a sticky mucus coating that protects it. The translucent slime

can be used or gathered to cover and protect oneself from the burning Mega-Damage fire.



Shield Cracker (Shield Penetrator Rifle)

This strange rifle is somewhat limited since it is only useful against force fields, but it so effective at what it does that the Librarians believe it will eventually become a staple of humanity's arsenal. The rifle's ammunition was created from a strange starfish that lives on the shores of the Great Ocean. These creatures were an annoyance to the Machine (and to the human's technological ancestors) because they would latch on to machines or power cables within the ocean and devour a surprisingly large amount of energy. They have existed in the Great Ocean for centuries, despite the Machine's efforts to exterminate them. They are basically harmless other than the amount of power they waste, but the Librarians were able to craft them into something much more destructive. The rifle fires these genetically modified starfish with decent range and accuracy despite their poor aerodynamics. When the starfish lands on an energy shield, it latches on as if it was clinging to the side of a fish tank and then starts absorbing the force field's energy at an incredible rate. The Librarians, however, were not content with simply draining the target's shields. They also added a small firing port to the underside of these parasitic little creatures that they can extrude directly through the shield itself. Once the starfish starts siphoning the field's power, it quickly converts this energy and fires it back at the target from beneath its own shields. The only way to avoid this energy blast is for the victim to turn off his shields and let the starfish fall harmlessly to the ground. Most robots and Splicers that have been on the business end of this weapon thought they could just flip off their force fields temporarily and then turn them back on once they shook off the parasite. They all found out the hard way that the disruptive nature of these starfish prevents any prematurely deactivated force fields from being reactivated for 4D4 minutes. Either way, the shooter succeeds in removing the target's shields. As devastating as this weapon is against force fields, it is completely harmless when fired directly at robots or living creatures. The projectiles cannot latch on with any amount of strength so they are easily removed, but even if they are allowed to cling to a target for an extended period of time, they never seem to siphon enough energy to cause any ill effects. There is just something about the raw energy of force fields that they can soak up like a sponge.

Weight: 11 lbs (5 kg).

M.D.C. of the Rifle: 2D4x10+20 M.D.C.

Range: 1,400 feet (426.7 m).

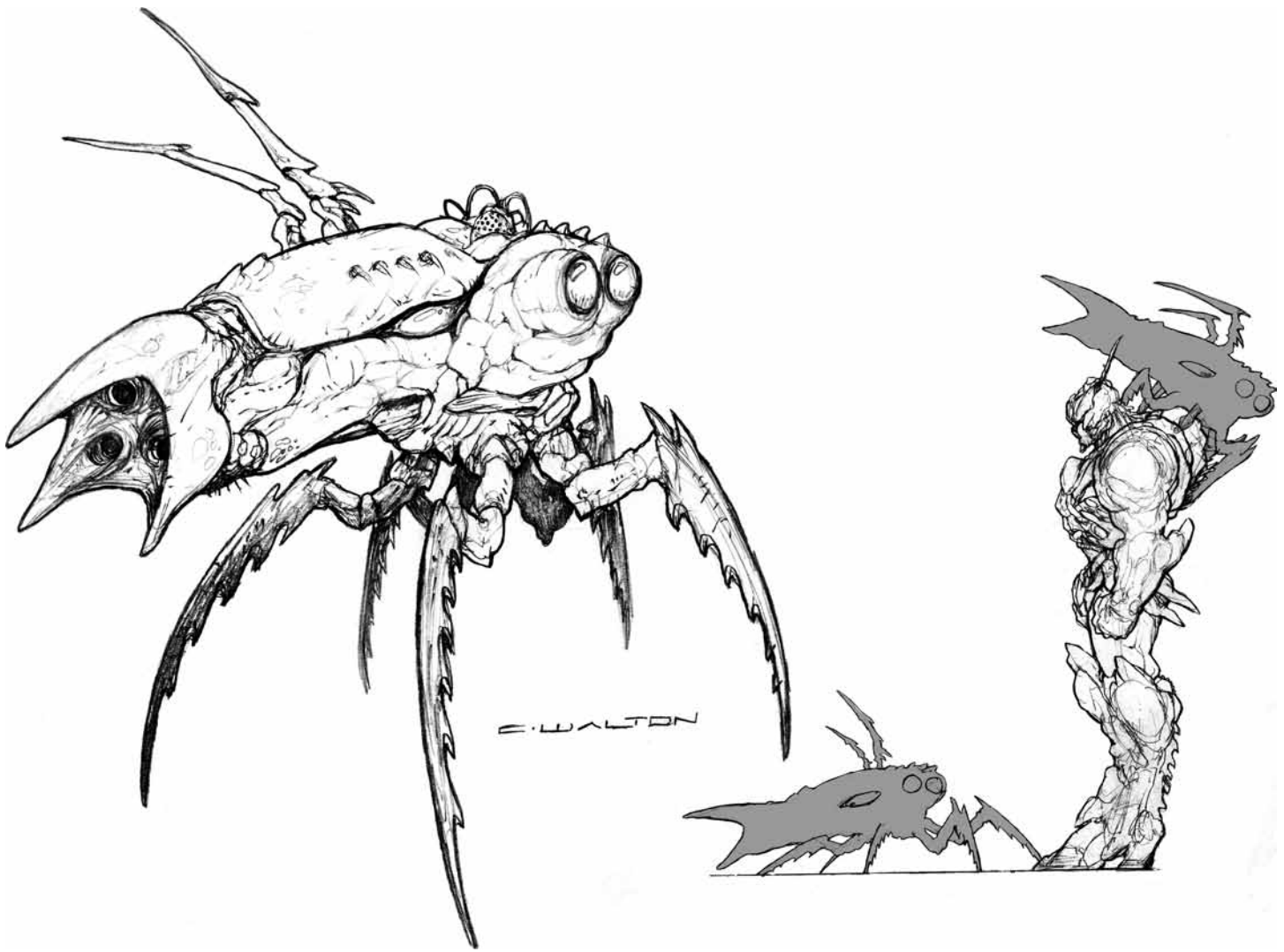
Mega-Damage: No damage from the initial impact. After two melee actions, the projectile starts drawing energy off the shield. At this point, the starfish inflicts 5D8 M.D. to the force field twice per melee round. The projectile also inflicts 3D6 M.D. to the main body of the target twice per melee round. Alternate back and forth between damaging the force field and damaging the main body every melee action.

Rate of Fire: Each shot counts as one melee attack.

Payload: 10 starfish projectiles. The Shield Cracker can regrow one spent projectile every 4D6 minutes.

Bonus: +1 to strike.

Trade Value: 19,000 credits, but limited availability.



Side Kick Rifles

Side Kick Rifles are House Artemis's latest attempt to take the concept of living weaponry to the next level. At first, these heavy Bio-Tech rifles just appear to be an organic rifle or cannon with a stylized insect-like appearance. However, when they crawl from atop of the shoulders or back of a Host Armor or War Mount and begin skittering across the ground, walls or ceilings and begin firing at targets acquired by the pilot, the whole concept of living weapon is reiterated. The Side Kick types that are available are a Bore Cannon (medium), Chemical Sprayer Cannon, Spore Discharger Cannon (medium) or Super Light Cell Cluster Cannon (four cells per rifle). Host Armors can have up to two Side Kicks; either both shoulders or shoulder and back-mounted configuration. War Mounts can have up to four Side Kicks. Any more Side Kicks have proven to overload Bio-Comms.

Side Kicks receive all the physical structured upgrades that their corresponding Host Armor or War Mount receive (e.g. Acid Blood, Increased M.D.C., Horned Defense, Regeneration, etc.), but they are limited with their senses as they are only equipped with a Bio-Comm, Advanced Eyes and Antennae (all other types of Sensors must be purchased and added to the Side Kick). For armors and War Mounts that have Stealth field abilities; once the Side Kick disengages from the Armor/War Mount, it is no longer hidden by the Stealth Field nor can it receive this Bio-Enhancement. Side Kick Rifles can only be upgraded with Omni, Mega and Super upgrades (described in the **Splicers® RPG** on page 107).

Weight: 18 lbs (8.1 kg). Most humans must use two hands to aim and shoot the weapon, otherwise they are -3 to strike. Individuals with a Splicer P.S. of 22 or higher can fire the weapon with one hand.

M.D.C. of the Rifle: 6D10+50 M.D.C.

Range:

Bore Type: 2,000 feet (610 m).

Chemical Sprayer Type: 12 feet (3.7 m) mist diameter or 40 feet (12.2 m) as a squirted spray.

Spore Discharger Cannon Type: 600 feet (183 m).

Super Light Cell Cluster Type: 1,000 feet (305 m), but the range can be increased to 2,000 feet (610 m) for 5 Bio-E per each Light Cell.

Mega-Damage:

Bore Type: 3D10 M.D. per grub fired. The Bore round does an additional 1D10+3 M.D. for the next 1D6 melee rounds, after the initial shot, as the grub eats its way into the target.

Chemical Sprayer Type varies with the type of chemical used (see **Splicers® RPG**, page 100).

Spore Discharger Type: 4D8 M.D., with a blast (splash) radius of 20 feet (6.1 m).

Super Light Cell Cluster Type: 1D10 M.D. per Super Light Cell fired in the volley from 1, 2, 3 or 4 Super Light Cells.

Rate of Fire: Each blast of the Bore Type, Chemical Sprayer and Spore Discharger counts as one melee attack. However, the Super Light Cell Cluster can fire volleys of 1, 2, 3 or all 4 Super Light Cells simultaneously and count as one melee attack.

Payload: Bore Types can have 24 Bore rounds, with the Host Armor producing one replacement grub every 3D6 minutes per spent grub fired. To reload its entire payload, it needs 2D4 hours.

Chemical Sprayer Types can produce enough of one chemical for up to ten attacks every 24 hours. If the capacity for more than one chemical is added to the weapon, each chemical can be used four times per 24 hours. Automatically regenerates within 24 hours of its initial use.

Spore Discharger and Super Light Cell Cluster types are effectively unlimited.

Bonus: +3 to strike on an aimed shot. +2 to strike when shooting wild.

Abilities When Operating Independently:

Running: Side Kicks can reach 50 mph (80 km) up to a maximum range of 2 miles (3.2 km) away from their commanding Bio-Comm Host Armor before overheating. The act of running does overheat the living cannon and they must rest for two hours before running again. If overheated, Side Kicks suffer a reduced speed of 50%, -3 to strike and dodge, and their maximum effective range is reduced by half. However, if the Side Kick periodically pauses for 10-20 minutes every hour or so, it can continue to run and fire at normal speeds and range.

Leaping: 10 feet (3 m) high or across.

Swimming: Not possible.

Number of Attacks per Melee: 2

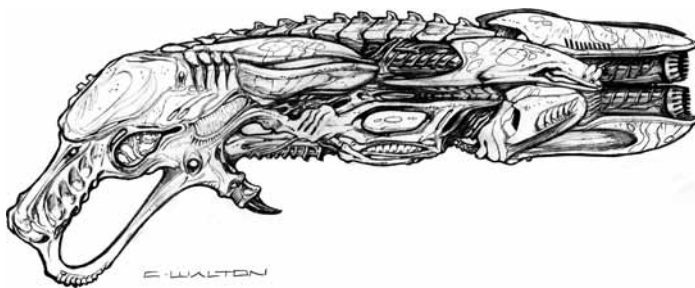
Combat Bonuses: +2 on initiative, +3 to strike in hand to hand combat, +4 to strike with its laser blast, +2 to parry, +3 to dodge, and impervious to Horror Factor, disease, and poison.

Close Combat Capabilities: Claw Strike 3D4 M.D.

Equivalent (Instinctive) Skills of Note: Climb 80% and Prowl 50%.

Penalties: Side Kicks must reconnect with their bonded Host Armor or War Mount every 1D4 days or they will die off. Side Kicks can only operate within 6 miles (9.6 km) away from their bonded Host Armor or War Mount. If the distance exceeds that, the Side Kick instantly goes dormant and will not move or come back online until it detects its bonded Bio-Comm.

Trade Value: 30,000 credits, but limited availability.



Thud Gun

This small, yet powerful short-range Bio-Tech firearm looks like an organic sawed-off shotgun. It fires high explosive shells that hammer targets with crushing concussive blasts that not only inflict tremendous damage, but are capable of knocking down all but the largest targets.

Weight: 5 lbs (2.25 kg).

M.D.C. of the Rifle: 5D10+30 M.D.C.

Range: 500 feet (152.4 m).

Mega-Damage: 6D8 M.D. per blast, plus there is a 01-45% likelihood of the impact knocking an opponent as large as 15 feet (4.6 m) tall off of his feet and onto his back. If knocked off his feet, the victim loses initiative and two melee attacks.

Rate of Fire: Each blast counts as one melee attack.

Payload: 15 shells. The Thud Gun can regrow one spent shell every 2D4 minutes.

Bonus: +1 to strike.

Trade Value: 14,000 credits, but limited availability.

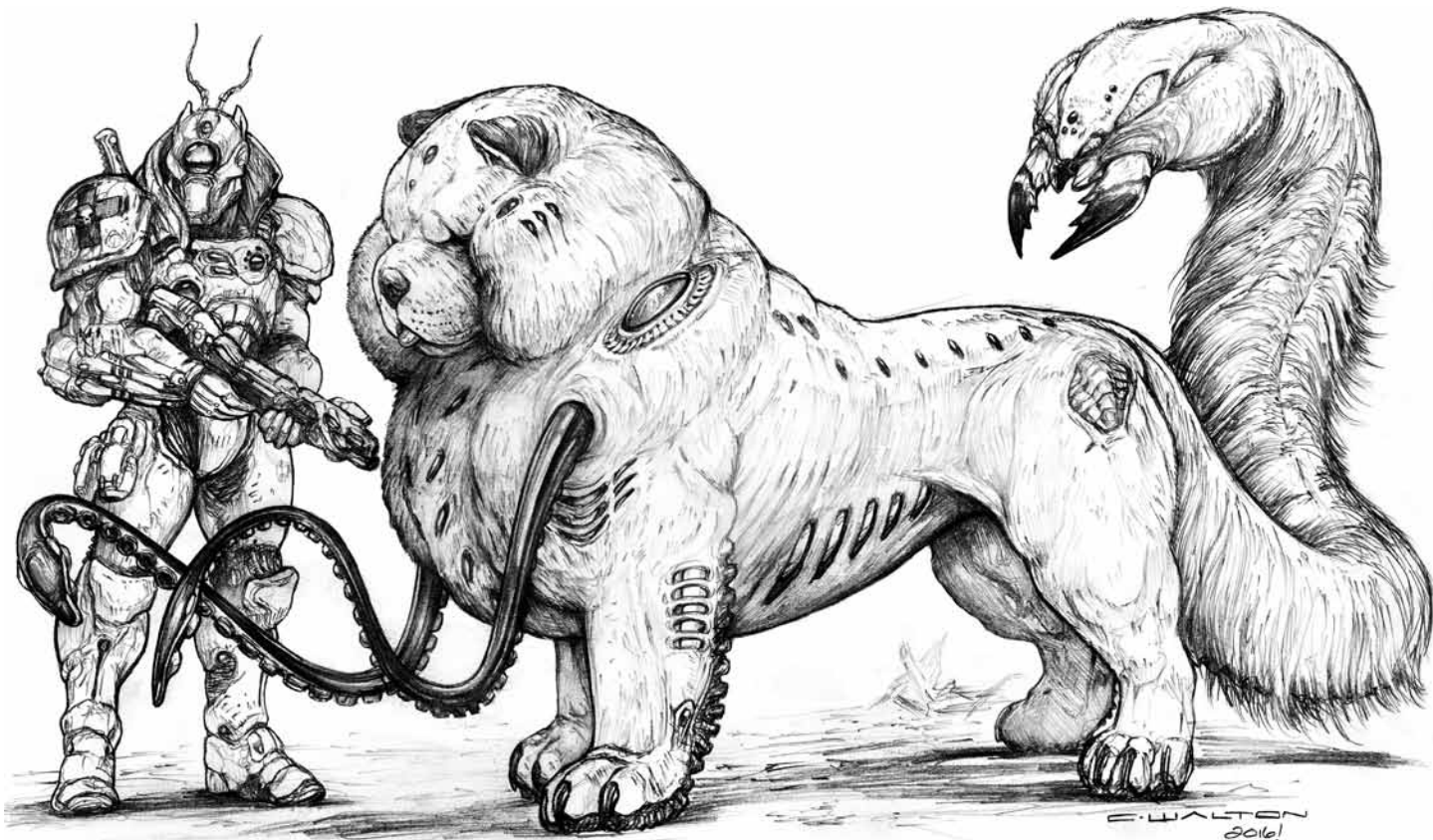
New Gore Hound Type – Samaritan

Created by Todd Spencley and Charles “Chuck” Walton II

The modifications of Gore Hounds have been met with a moderate level of criticism, as the standard Gore Hounds have proven themselves time and time again to be versatile, formidable, quick, intelligent, trustworthy and cohesive field units. They are exceptional scouts, trackers, hunters, guardians and fighters. Add to the fact that Gore Hounds can be customized with bio-enhancements, various armament and defences; Packmasters rarely would entertain utilizing anything other than Gore Hounds. However, even being augmentable, there are certain specialized functions that can use a little more enhancement without breaking the envelope. Maulers were created as purified weapons, but medically speaking, there are very few field options to help sustain Splicers. The small population of Saints among the Resistance are extremely valuable and make attractive targets for capture by the Machine, and are not deployed very often on the surface. Unfortunately, numerous soldiers have died on the battlefield due to the lack of speed and the intensity of ongoing combat that surrounds most wounded victims. This typically means that by the time a Saint reaches a victim it is too late. However, a specialized Gore Hound can reach and help sustain wounded soldiers or move them to safer staging areas where victims could be stabilized just long enough for a Saint or emergency evacuation team to properly treat them.

Librarian Constantine marvelled at the natural bond between humans and hounds, probing the minds of Biotics, Scarecrows and other field soldiers, and studying how Gore Hounds rush to someone's aid or defense and do their very best to appease their Packmasters. Constantine pondered on a Gore Hound design that would specialize in being a first responder for Splicers. The Librarian discussed the matter with Warlord Artemis and it was agreed upon that another Gore Hound upgrade would be approved, a medical support type called the *Samaritan*. Inspired by the ancient world breeds like the Saint Bernard, Newfoundland, Bouvier De Flanders and Labrador Retriever, Samaritans are Gore Hounds that have been augmented with their instincts heightened towards human life and preservation. Designed to tend to injured victims during intense battles or critical situations, the Samaritan is engineered to endure attacks while not being distracted from its primary tasks of reaching, tending to, sustaining and if need be, defending victims. When required, the Samaritan will retrieve and relocate victims to a more suitable staging area where victims can be best treated by either the Gore Hound itself via a licking bath provided by its quick-healing tongue that serves as a Slap Patch (see **Splicers® RPG**, page 130 for capabilities) and its limited medical abilities or by a nearby Saint or other field support. It relies heavily on the rest of the Gore-Pack to tackle any threats, but it will defend itself and particularly those it is assigned to retrieve or protect with a valiant ferocity when enraged.

Samaritans look very different from most Gore Hounds, as it is important to preserve a calming, non-threatening presence while they tend to the wounded. To help fulfill this, Constantine designed Samaritans to have a very thick, soft coat of fur that covers layers of physical attack-resistant blubber, armor plating and powerful muscles that stand out under the heavy fur. The fur coat, while being exceptionally soft, is remarkably durable (Mega-Damage) and has an elastic skin adhered to the body through a not a very lax subcutaneous tissue, giving them a slight wrinkly appeal. The thick, loose folds of skin allow Samaritans to scramble into jagged edged areas to reach wounded comrades without being torn up in the process. The skin also enables the Gore Hound to physically grapple with adversaries like alien predators, rival Splicers or machines that are wielding sharp-edged weapons by reducing the severity of their lacerations and overall penetration by half for claws, teeth, spines, daggers, small blades, spurs, etc. All Vibro-Blades, long swords, stabbing attacks and projectile munitions deliver full damage unless augmented otherwise.



One of the saving graces of the Samaritan design has to be its Slap Patch tongue. The Purple or Emerald colored tongue is based off of the medical Bio-Tech device and operates in the same capacity as a Slap Patch only the Samaritan's tongue is designed to be for long-term usage. It stops bleeding, soothes burns, stops bruising, reduces swelling and begins to regenerate damaged areas of living beings (human and Bio-Tech oriented). The tongue heals 3D8 S.D.C. points and 1D10 Hit Points per melee round to humans and ordinary animals, and 2D10 M.D.C. to Mega-Damage animals and Bio-Tech Devices. The healing is very quick, requiring only 1D6 melee actions for the healing to start and the organism regenerates damage and heals wounds once each melee round for 2D4 rounds. The Samaritan's saliva has blood clotting and cleansing agents to prevent blood loss or infection and they also stimulate the victims to help prevent them from going into a coma (+2 to saving throws). To help maintain some form of sanitary treatment and care, the Samaritan's fur coat and the pores on its skin secrete a sterilizing dew that is easily released when the area is pressed. This allows for the Gore Hound to sterilize open wounds simply by pressing up into a victim with a slight nudge. Field medics may also cleanse themselves from germs, poisons, venoms, viruses, toxins, bio-acids, blood and bacteria, and even reduce their scent, by pressing on the Samaritan's fur until they have enough dew and wiping themselves with it. The dew is very active against blood, literally causing blood to evaporate within minutes. The dew does not remove Napalm, Chemical Sprayer stick-um, webbing, or metal of any form.

The Samaritan's "puppy fat" is blubber that is highly resistant to physical attacks. This makes the Samaritan look cute and puppy-like and helps its first impression appear non-threatening, especially to strangers that are wary of Bio-Tech. However, it serves as well-placed cushioning to protect the Gore Hound from blunt attacks as well as falls, explosive concussive forces and impacts as it strives to reach wounded victims located in hostile or deadly places such as a combat field, ravine, alien predator's lair, etc. Adding to the Samaritan's unique design are a pair of retractable, slender, squid-like *Medical Tentacles* that act as manipulators and can perform minor tasks similar to that of a Prehensile Tail (see **Splicers® RPG**, page 94). Each tentacle is equipped with powerful

suckers that aid in grabbing and securing hold of patients with a suction force of 200 P.S.I./1,379 kilo-pascals. These suckers help secure severely wounded victims that are in shock or pain and are struggling or panicking, while the Samaritan makes a getaway from danger.

The most alien feature of the Samaritan is its massive, Manticore-styled tail that houses a set of powerful, furry mandibles at the tip designed for grasping, grappling and lifting heavy objects. However, they also fulfill the role and serve as emergency "Jaws of Life" when human pilots need to be safely cut out of their Host Armor or War Mount carcasses before they suffocate or bleed to death inside. The ant-like mandibles are incredibly strong and precise, with a Splicer P.S. of 30 and inflicts 2D6+10 M.D. when they are used to spread openings and otherwise pry open doors, hatches, shells or tearing through debris, armor carapaces, shells and hulls (not applicable to punches). Despite the immense strength of the Pincer mandibles, the Samaritan can control them with a keen sensitivity to lift or carry the injured very gently. They are typically used as a hoist to carefully lift similar-sized objects or victims onto the Samaritan's back for emergency evacuation. Victims can range from a fallen soldier in Living Body Armor, Biotic or a fellow Gore Hound packmate to some of the larger-scaled Biotics and Host Armors (not exceeding 900 pounds/405 kg). Once a victim is atop of the back, the Samaritan will use its tail and pair of Medical Tentacles to secure the victim while it flees at half speed until the victim is safe. Unlike standard Gore Hounds, which are severely hindered by carrying their maximum weight on their backs (reduce speed to 30% of cruise speed), Samaritans are built to be strong haulers that can carry heavy victims of this scale up to 10 miles (16 km) away at half normal cruise speed before requiring rest. They can even scale up or down walls while carrying the victim.

Please note however, that despite their puppy-like appearance, underneath these cute features is still at heart, a powerful Gore Hound built for rugged terrain and battle. Samaritans are built like canine tanks, resembling a massive Chow Chow breed of ancient days, only more robust. Broad, enhanced muscles and jaw power enable it to secure vice-like bites (but apply soft-mouthed care like Labradors or other hunting/retrieving breeds) onto large objects to drag them down or to if in a dire need, tow massive War Mount-sized objects up to the size of a Behe-

moth for one mile (1.6 km) away at 5 mph (8 km) across rough terrain, before being totally exhausted. They are very durable and can hold their own among the pack.

To create a Samaritan, the Librarians will enhance a Packmaster's preexisting Gore Hound (can not be a Mauler) with the following Bio-Enhancements and changes: +2 to M.A. Attribute, Advanced Senses, Increased M.D.C. (x3), Reinforced Exoskeleton, Suction Cups and Gripping Hairs (all four feet and tail), Retractable shoulder-mounted tentacles (2 to start, can add 2 additional at levels 9 and 15), Bio-Force Field Emitter Spheres (one mounted on each shoulder above the tentacle ports), Slap Patch Tongue and saliva glands that acts as a Slap Patch (see **Splicers® RPG**, page 130; also cleanses and kills infection), and a massive Crane Tail.

M.D.C. by Location:

Front Legs (2) – 150 each
Hind Legs (2) – 150 each
Tail – 125
Tentacles (2) – 112 each
Bio-Force Field Spheres (2) – 50 each (one on each shoulder)
Head – 187
Main Body – 520

Running Speed: 75 mph (120 km) base (maximum upgrade is a top speed of 95 mph/152 km), but normal cruising speed is only 30 mph (48 km).

Height: 4.2 feet (1.28 m) at the shoulders, 5.1 feet (1.55 m) to the top of the head.

Width: 3.8 feet (1.15 m) shoulder to shoulder. Each Medical Tentacle can reach 8 feet (2.4 m).

Length: 8 feet, 3 inches (2.5 m) from tip of nose to the rump, 10.5 feet (3.2 m) tail.

Weight: 600 lbs (270 kg) plus its 90 pound (40.5 kg) armored tail; 690 pounds (310.5 kg) total.

Physical Strength: 23 Supernatural.

Number of Attacks per Melee: 5

Horror Factor: 8 individually, 10 with four or more Gore Hounds or when standing over and defending a patient.

Augmentation/Gestation Period: Two months gestation plus another three months growth.

Combat Bonuses: +4 on initiative, +4 to strike in melee combat, +2 to parry, -3 to Automatic Dodge (i.e. Auto-Dodge is +1, not +4 like a standard Gore Hound), +3 to pull punch/bite, +5 to roll with punch, fall or impact, +2 to disarm, +4 to save vs Horror Factor, and +6 to save vs poisons/toxins and disease. Tail is +5 to dodge, +2 to entangle, and +3 to strike and parry but gets no other bonuses. Primary Medical Tentacles receive an additional +2 to strike/grab hold of living beings.

Combat Capabilities: Restrained head butt: 1D4 S.D.C., Full Strength Head Butt: 2D6 M.D., Pawing Claw Strike with Front Legs: 3D6 M.D., Tail Slap: 4D6 M.D., Biting Attack: 3D6 M.D., Leap Attack: 5D6 M.D., and Running Leap Attack/Ram Attack/Body Block: 7D6 M.D. (For Leap Attack and Running Leap Attack, see **Splicers® RPG**, page 118.)
Equivalent (instinctive) Skills of Note: Begging 75%, Climb 70%/ 0%, Detect Ambush 55%, Detect Concealment 60%, Emergency Medical Skill Treatment (35% via Pre-Programmed Instincts), Herding 80%, Identify Plants & Fruits (i.e., stuff it can eat) 80%, Land Navigation 78%, Prowl 35%, Swim 60%.

Penalties: -15% to Prowl, Gymnastics and Swimming, -5% to Acrobatics and -3 to Auto-Dodge. Due to the modifications made to the Gore Hound, it costs the Packmaster 1 melee attack/action to make the Samaritan attack any human being (2 attacks if the target is another Packmaster). In addition, the Samaritan will fight with less than its full potential, losing 1 of its own attacks and all bonuses are half (unless defending a member of its own pack or Packmaster). Unless otherwise noted, all further augmentations will cost twice the normal amount of Bio-E.

Increased Empathy: Gets upset seeing others in pain, and in some large battles (many wounded), the Packmaster may have to keep the Samaritan focused on the task at hand. 01-30% chance that it loses 1 attack/action

per round in fights involving more than 25 biological individuals, as it wants to help all living beings.

Note: Any horns, spikes, needles, spines, serrated spurs, sharp edges, slime coating or Acid Blood that could accidentally injure a wounded victim or prevent a Samaritan from efficiently performing its job will be removed during the upgrading process by the Engineer and will not be added afterwards by an Engineer. Tail cannot receive any weapons or augmentations. Any ranged weapons should be placed so that wounded victims will not be in the line of fire.

Samaritan Bio-Enhancements

Each of the Samaritan's shoulder-mounted Medical Tentacles end in a distal tentacular club similar to that of a squid's tentacle tip. These tentacle ends are dubbed "Mittens" and can be modified with any of the following bio-enhancements for more intricate field performance and features.

Breather Cups

These circular cups are able to stretch over the mouth of a victim and are connected to multiple inner-tubes running throughout the tentacle that lead to a dedicated port inside the Samaritan's lungs where it can breathe and have air from its lungs go directly into the lungs of a victim requiring oxygen. The Cup is like a breathing mask and stays fastened to the victim's face without causing any harm and can be easily removed or released by the Gore Hound or the patient without any injury. Breathers are great for assisting Splicers that have drowned, inhaled some toxic fumes or gas, been poisoned, been constricted, gone into shock or seizures, are in a coma or have suffocated while being sealed inside a heavy Host Armor for too long.

M.D.C.: Each Breather Cup has 1D6 M.D.C. and a maximum of 2 cups per tentacle can be installed.

Bio-E Cost: 2 points per each cup.

Jolt Pads

These flat, pad-shaped cups when applied act as emergency defibrillator paddles that can shock a stopped or misfiring heart back into action or normal function. They can also be used to shock robots and stun living opponents like an Electrical Discharger (see **Splicers® RPG**, page 101), but are typically used as last resort weapons because the Samaritan does not want the Jolt Pads damaged should an emergency victim require them and can't afford the regeneration downtime. However, Packmates roughhousing a little too rough have certainly yelped when the Samaritan has had enough.

M.D.C.: Each Jolt Pad has 15 M.D.C. Maximum of one pad per Medical Tentacle can be installed and it requires a minimum of two pads to have full contact for the electrical circuit to be completed in order to deliver the shock. Samaritans will not deliver harmful shocks to humans, only to revive them unless ordered directly by a Packmaster.

Mega-Damage: 1D4 S.D.C. or Hit Points when applied as a medical defibrillator to stabilize or revive the heart of a human or animal, and they do not suffer any other penalties. When used as an attack they can deliver up to 2D12 M.D. upon contact of 2 pads. Against humans and other biological/living creatures, they must roll to save vs stun attack (15 or higher, with any possible bonus from P.E.) or they will also lose initiative, two melee attacks and are at -4 on all combat actions for 2D4 melee rounds. Machines take only the M.D. inflicted by shock.

Bonus: +4 to strike when an opponent is entangled by the tentacles.

Bio-E Cost: 5 points for both Pads.

Prerequisite: Increased Metabolic Rate and Electrical Resistance.

Medical Probes

Smaller, retractable tendrils are mounted into special sucker cups mounted on the undersides of the Medical Tentacle's Mitten and are used as medical probes, scalpels, needles, tweezers and manipulators.

Each Mitten can have up to a maximum of 3 Medical Probe Suction Cups, each containing 4 Probe Tendrils that can be extended at will to grab/probe individuals up to 1 foot (0.3 m) away, or used to reach or pick up small objects.

M.D.C.: Each Medical Probe Suction Cup has 1D6 M.D.C., and each Medical Probe tendril has 1D4 M.D.C. Maximum Number of Tendrils Possible: 3 cups (12 tendrils) on each tentacle can be installed.

Mega-Damage: 1 S.D.C per probe, as they only cause a slight sting as they enter (target loses 1 attack/action). Once the target has been pierced, the Gore Hound can remove the tendrils at any time or can keep them impaled in his target, securing them to each other. If pulled out the target suffers 1D4 M.D. per Probe tentacle and the Samaritan's Medical Probe incurs damage (loses 1D4 tendrils till they can be regenerated).

Bonuses: +2 to entangle, +10% for emergency Medical skill treatments. For example, removing bullets, metal shrapnel or fragments, securing severed arteries before they retract deeper into the body, removing small internal machine or alien parasites (insect to rat size), etc.

Penalties: Skills that require delicate fingers and or manual dexterity such as Demolitions, Palming, Pick Pockets or Pick Locks, etc., suffer a skill penalty of -15% when performed with the Medical Probes.

Bio-E Cost: 5 points per each cup.

Prerequisite: None.

Ultrasound Cup Pads

Up to 2 suction cups can be modified per Mitten manipulator to become an ultrasound pad. Meant primarily as a way for the Samaritan to be able to scan and tell if the biological being they are grabbing is safe to pull (the Gore Hound utters a high-pitched whine in the ultra-sound frequency range, channeling and emitting above audible human level sound waves into the victim using the Cup Pad to scan over the victim's body. The pads do not have to make contact with the subject, they just need to be within 3 feet (0.9 m) over the subject being scanned. After 1D4 melee actions, the Samaritan and the Packmaster that is linked to the Gore Hound via Bio-Comm, are both able to 'see' inside the victims's body (double if the Biological being scanned is in Heavy Living Body Armor or Host Armor and multiply by four if the Biological is a War Mount that is bigger than a Grendel or Strider. The ultrasound scan helps the Gore Hound tremendously by providing it with a comprehensive image and understanding of what and where critical damage is, and what is safe and secure to grab for contact points versus what it should avoid to prevent causing more damage to its patient. The Librarians that designed the Samaritan also learned that ultrasounds are some of the same bio-sonar abilities used by dolphins, porpoises and bats and have an alarming effect on some species that are sensitive to ultrasounds and can be used to flush insects and fish wildlife (even larger specimens seem to choose to avoid the sounds). A happy accident was discovered that rodents are also sensitive to ultrasounds and that the Samaritan's ultrasounds can also deter the Machine's *Rat Bombs* within 40 feet (12.2 m), making them flee in the opposite direction up to half a mile (0.8 km; see **Splicers® RPG**, page 35).

When not in battle, the Samaritan makes itself of great use to unarmed pilots by applying therapeutic treatments for ligaments, tendons, and scar tissue that can still linger even after the Slap Patch licking treatments. Conditions for which ultrasound may be used for treatment include the follow examples: ligament sprains, muscle strains, tendonitis, joint inflammation, arthritis, and scar tissue adhesion. The ultrasound pads are also beneficial for breaking up stony deposits or tissue, accelerating the effects of drugs in targeted areas, and can be used to sort cells or small particles for DNA research (thus helping isolate alien predator DNA samples for Librarians to use).

Mega-Damage: None.

Bonus: +1 to entangle per cup.

Bio-E Cost: 3 Bio-E per Cup (1 Pad per pair of Tentacles) with a maximum of 3 Cups possible.

Prerequisite: None, but if equipped with the Sonar Bio-Enhancement (see **Splicers® RPG**, page 82), the Samaritan can then use its ultrasound

sensory capability through its melon to scan living victims or biological targets for their physical anatomy structures, weakened or wounded areas such as broken bones, internal bleeding, etc., at a range of 100 feet (30.5 m).

New War Mounts

Badger (Armored Personnel Carrier)

Often the most daunting aspect of assaulting the Machine's installations is simply reaching the destination without suffering too much damage and without exhausting too many resources. Strike teams need to cross miles of hazardous territory to reach their objective, and once they get there, they still need to get past multiple fortifications and defensive weapon emplacements as well as legions of guards before they can hit their true target. To make matters worse, the teams generally need to travel light so that they do not weigh themselves down on the journey. Even when they do load up on ordnance, it is still far too easy to exhaust their munitions along the way. Librarian Michelangelo's latest War Carrier design, the Badger, was created as a way to address these problems.

The Badger was built to be the ultimate underground armored personnel transport and breaching vehicle. Within this massive and seemingly solid beast is a hollow cavity that can hold an impressive number of armored troops and even some War Mounts. Its specially designed troop compartment is lined with special, fluid-filled bladders that inflate around passengers to hold them in place and cushion them from impacts during combat maneuvers. Being completely engulfed and immobilized by these bladders can be a little claustrophobic and unnerving at first, but the Badger possesses a special enhancement that quickly circumvents this little problem. To keep people from panicking, the bladders form a neurological connection with each passenger, allowing them to see, hear, and experience what the Badger does. The bladders naturally retract away from the passengers' faces to prevent them from being smothered, and the air within the compartment is recycled quickly to keep it from becoming stale. The entire compartment design is experimental, but it has been well received in field tests. The Badger can engage in incredibly high-impact and abrupt maneuvers without shaking up the passengers at all. Plus the neurological connection keeps passengers connected to the world around them instead of locked away from it. Knowing what is going on outside of the carrier gives troops a significant advantage. They can prepare themselves for whatever threats they are about to face instead of blindly charging out into the fight.

While tunneling underground, the Badger's eight powerful legs allow it to almost swim through the earth as it tears through sand, dirt, and stone at incredible speeds. Unlike the Tunnel Rat War Mount, the Badger cannot create stabilized nor permanent tunnels due to its large size. It was designed to burrow through the earth and let the dirt collapse behind it in order to discourage pursuit. Badgers can dig large dens called *Setts*, but the overall stability of these excavation pockets for anyone not wearing Light Body Armor or more, should be of high concern when considering cave-ins and being trapped underneath tons of dirt and rubble. The Badger possesses a pair of experimental organs in its body that break down carbon dioxide in the blood into useable oxygen. These Bio-Tech scrubbers enable the Badger to effectively hold its breath underground for up to twenty hours during transport missions (maximum is forty hours before suffering ill effects). Ferrying troops beneath the surface like this not only allows strike teams to save their strength during the voyage, but it also allows them to haul along much heavier ordnance. This combined with the fact that underground transport circumvents hundreds (possibly thousands) of robot patrols, traps, barricades, fortifications, Sentry Tow-





ers, Waste Crawler gangs, alien predators, and rival Splicers, means that these teams emerge from their protective cocoon at peak strength, ready to unleash a devastating assault on their real objective.

Additionally, these strike teams receive some pretty impressive support once they deploy. The Badger is far more than just a transport. Michelangelo took the natural power and ferocity of normal badgers and increased them a hundredfold. Aside from a massive increase in size, he equipped his new War Carrier design with some of his latest Bio-Weapon innovations. He wanted the Badger War Carrier to be able to protect its cargo from any threat, and to provide heavy support once it delivers its payload. When the Badger first breaks through the perimeter wall of a target installation, it uses its plasma breath to clear out the closest threats. It then raises a point defense force field to shield itself from enemy fire (and from its own area effect weapons) before firing off a salvo from its shoulder-mounted cluster bomb launchers. These weapons are similar to Pod Launchers, only on a massive scale. They can shower everything within a 100 foot (30.5 m) radius with a thick blanket of deadly shrapnel. Finally, the Badger fills the room with a powerful chemical cloud to weaken and confound any remaining resistance before the troops come storming out. Against robotic targets, this chemical is a burning vapor that melts metal and other artificial materials without harming living targets, but the Badger can also unleash a special Bio-Toxin cloud that paralyzes organic technology during operations against rival Great Houses.

As remarkable as it is as a breaching vehicle, the Badger War Carrier can be even more impressive and dangerous when it assaults surface targets. It possesses thick bone armor that protects it from harm while damaging anyone that gets too close. It has four razor sharp claws per foot that are each larger than a man, and its bite can cleave a War Mount in half. The Badger can tackle targets directly with an excellent chance of winning or it can engage in a deadly game of cat and mouse that few adversaries have the ability to counter. Mounted along its snout are two Shrieker launchers. The Badger can quickly tag a target with these tracking rounds and then tunnel safely underground before the enemy can counter-strike. It can then pop up again in a safe location and unleash a barrage of Organic Rockets or launch its experimental Millipedoes. These special Bio-Tech explosives can home in on a Shrieker round's signal from up to two miles (3.2 km) away with nearly perfect accuracy. The Badger can simply pop up and fire and then disappear below ground again and again until the target is destroyed, often without ever taking a single hit.

There have only been a handful of field tests so far, but at this time, it seems pretty clear that no faction on the planet possesses anything that can stop the Badger from reaching its objective. In time, N.E.X.U.S. will likely create robots that can tunnel through the earth after it, but until that happens, House Artemis should be able to wreak impressive havoc upon the Machine within this Area of Influence. Currently, only three Badgers have reached maturity, but a total of eleven are growing in birthing sacs right now and should hatch within the next five years. Once all eleven are introduced into the field, House Artemis will cement itself as the dominant power within the region.

Class: Heavy Assault Carrier and Breaching War Mount.

Crew: One rider concealed within the neck.

Troop Capacity: The Badger can carry 30 troopers in Host Armor, 45 troopers in Living Body Armor, or 60 unarmored humans. Some War Mounts are also small enough to fit in the Badger. Typically, the limiting factor is the size of the hatch. Each hatch is 10 feet (3 m) tall and 5 feet (1.5 m) wide. As long as the War Mount can squeeze through, it is typically not a problem (although a length under 15 feet (4.6 m) is preferred).

M.D.C. by Location:

Legs (8) – 1,700 each

Paws (8) – 650 each

Tail – 420

Shrieker Launchers (2) – 80 each

Cluster Bomb Launchers (2) – 385 each

Organic Rockets (60) – 11 each

Millipede Launch Bay Doors (8) – 200 each

Millipedoes (2) – 420 each

Head – 1,200*

Main Body – 3,800*

Troop Compartment Doors (3) – 800

Point Defense Bio-Force Field – 1,500

* Depleting the M.D.C. of the Head or Main Body kills the Badger.

Speed:

Running: 60 mph (96 km) maximum, but normal cruising speed is only 35 mph (56 km). The act of running does tire out the War Mount but not the rider. The Badger can run at top speed for up to two hours straight before needing to rest for 1D6x10+30 minutes. However, it can fight or trot along at cruising speed almost all day (20 hours) without needing rest.

Leaping: Not possible.

Digging: 35 mph (56 km) through sand, dirt, clay, rock or stone. Digging does not tire out the War Mount and it can dig an adequate hole to cover itself in 1D4 melee rounds.

Swimming: Not possible. It sinks like a stone. The Badger can walk along the bottom at a speed of 20 mph (32 km) as long as it does not exceed its maximum depth tolerance.

Underwater Depth: Maximum depth is 1,000 feet (305 m).

Flying: Not possible.

Statistical Data:

Height: 70 feet (21 m) tall at the shoulder.

Width: 50 feet (15.2 m).

Length: 110 feet (33.5 m) nose to rump, with a 32 foot (9.8 m) tail.

Weight: 30 to 35 tons.

Cargo: Can carry 10 tons in its internal compartment or it can drag up to 70 tons behind it.

Physical Strength: 1D8+62.

Production Cycle: 5 year gestation period plus 15 year growth cycle. Only a 6 month gestation period plus 2 year growth cycle for the temporary generation.

Operational Lifetime: 70 year life span. Only a 7 year life span for the temporary generation.

Bio-Regeneration Rate: 1D6x10 per minute to the main body and 3D6 per minute to all other locations. Destroyed limbs or weapon systems will regenerate after 48 hours.

Horror Factor: 16 against humans outside the Resistance, none against robots.

Feeding: The Badger is a Carnivore. It needs to eat 1000-1500 pounds (450 to 675 kg) of animal matter each day, and may gorge on up to 3 tons at one time. After gorging, the War Carrier can go 1D4+1 days without feeding and without suffering any ill effects.

Color: The thick bone armor "hair" is a light tan in color on the body and black patches separated by a white streak down the middle of its head, face and muzzle. The eight legs are black. A second variation resembles a honey badger as the top of the Badger is off white and the face, muzzle, along the sides, legs and underbelly are solid black.

Sleep Requirements: As an artificially created organism, the Badger only requires 4 hours of sleep per day.

Other Data:

An unmanned Badger is able to operate independent of a rider using its animal-like intelligence and instincts to respond to any given situation. Badgers can be surly and temperamental beasts. A Badger will form connections with its handlers and other familiar humans, but strangers should tread lightly when entering its den. It can be very protective of its domain and may attack people that act too aggressively in its Sett. Badgers quickly learn that robots are the enemy and will attack them whenever they get too close. Badgers have been known to come to the aid of their handlers and other favored humans, but they tend to ignore strangers in trouble unless commanded to do so by an Outrider or Packmaster. Badgers are also highly opportunistic and may go after a meal (rival War Mount or alien wildlife) or be very territorial and not share kills with other War Mounts, especially larger feeders, until it has had enough to eat.

Alignment: Considered Unprincipled or Anarchist. They fight for their own preservation or when ordered to battle on behalf of humans.

War Mount Attributes: I.Q. 1D6+3, M.E. 1D6+6, M.A. 1D6+7, P.S. 63-70, P.P. 1D4+10, P.E. 1D6+22, P.B. 2D4, Spd 60 mph (96 km) on the ground.

Number of Attacks per Melee: 8

Combat Bonuses: +3 on initiative, +6 to strike in hand to hand combat, +6 to parry, -2 to dodge, +3 to roll with punch, +3 to pull punch, and impervious to Horror Factor, disease, and poison.

Equivalent (Instinctive) Skills of Note: Land Navigation (Underground) 90%, Excavation/Mining 85%, Hunting 70%, and understands the Native Language of the Great House that created it and one other common language at 70%. Recognizes robots and machines as enemies to be destroyed or chased away.

Combat Capabilities:

Bite: 2D6x10+30 M.D.

Restrained Claw Strike: 3D6 M.D.

Claw Strike: 2D6x10 M.D.

Power Claw Strike: 4D6x10, but counts as two attacks.

Stomp: 1D6x10, but can only be done to opponents that are less than 10 feet (3 m) tall.

Body Block/Ram: 8D8 and has a 01-85% likelihood of knocking an opponent up to 30 feet (9 m) tall off his feet and onto his back. If knocked off his feet, the target loses initiative and two melee attacks. A ram attack counts as two attacks.

Senses and Features: Standard for War Mounts plus:

Enhanced Regeneration: 1D6x10 M.D. per minute to the main body and 3D6 M.D. per minute to all other locations.

Seismic Sense: Can feel vibrations of earthquakes, thunder, explosions and even the approach of heavy vehicles, troops, and stampeding animals up to 12 miles (19.2 km) away. The approach of smaller beings can be sensed within 200 feet (61 m).

Oxygen Scrubbers: The Badger possesses a pair of experimental organs in its body that are able to break down carbon dioxide molecules in the blood and re-circulate the useable oxygen. This enables the Badger to operate without fresh oxygen for up to forty hours. Anything beyond 40 hours, and the scrubbers become overwhelmed and cease to function until they can flush out all the excess carbon. At this point, the Badger must get fresh air for 4D6 minutes while the scrubbers clean themselves out. In the alternative, if the Badger gets 2D4 minutes of fresh air every 10 hours, then the scrubbers can function at peak efficiency indefinitely.

Internal Passenger Compartment: The specially designed passenger compartment helps keep troops secure and protected during combat maneuvers. A series of fluid filled bladders swell around all the passengers to hold them in place and cushion them from impacts. The bladders can sense air being exhaled from living beings and hold back a few inches to prevent them from being smothered. This can be a bit claustrophobic, but these bladders also form a neurological connection with each passenger, allowing them to see, hear, and feel everything the Badger experiences. In field tests, this connection to the world helped keep passengers calm and relaxed during transport. There are three exits for this compartment. One on each side and one just below the Badger's neck. When the hatches are sealed shut, they are difficult to see and even more difficult to pry open. It takes a combined Splicer P.S. of 80 to forcibly open a hatch or 800 M.D. to destroy one.

Bone Armor: Each hair on the Badger's body is actually a 3-4 foot (0.9 to 1.2 m) long bone spike. This thick layer of overlapping armor provides excellent protection, plus the razor-sharp tips inflict 4D6 M.D. to anyone grappling with the Badger or trying to apply a hold, squeeze attack, body block or pounce/leap attack to the War Carrier. Likewise, adversaries throwing a punch or kick at the Badger will inflict damage, but take 2D6 M.D. in return from the sharp pelt of spikes.

Point Defense Bio-Force Field: While this shield does protect the War Carrier from enemy fire during breaching maneuvers, the main reason why Librarian Michelangelo included it was to prevent the Badger from severely harming itself with its cluster bombs. During the original

field tests, these cluster bombs proved to be a little too effective when fired in tight quarters. The first prototype blinded itself and nearly blew its own head off the first time it practiced a breach. Now with the shield in place, a Badger War Carrier can unleash a devastating barrage of cluster bombs at point-blank range without fear of injury. The shield may take full damage during the attack, but the Badger takes no damage. The shield has 1,500 M.D.C. and it naturally regenerates 1D6x10 M.D.C. every minute. If the M.D.C. of the force field is depleted, then it cannot be reactivated for 12 hours.

Bio-Weapon Systems:

1. Cluster Bomb Launchers (2): The strange multi-barreled cannons mounted on each shoulder are capable of firing off huge salvos of cluster bombs. These weapons are typically used during breaching missions to clear a room of enemies before deploying the onboard troopers. The ammunition is similar to the seed pods used in Pod Weapons, only much larger. The arrangement of the barrels limits the effective range, but it greatly increases the area of effect. The wide arc creates a pretty good spread, and once the cluster bombs start detonating, they cover a huge area in deadly shrapnel.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Range: Can be launched up to 300 feet (91.5 m) away, but are generally used at point blank range (within 50 feet/15.2 m).

Mega-Damage: A single burst inflicts 1D8x10 M.D. to everything within a 60 foot (18.3 m) radius. Both cannons can fire off a massive dual burst that inflicts 2D6x10 M.D. to everything in a 100 foot (30.5 m) radius.

Rate of Fire: Each single or dual blast counts as one melee attack.

Payload: Each launcher grows enough cluster bombs for 20 bursts per hour (40 total); automatically regenerates.

Bonus: +2 to strike.

2. Plasma Breath: The mouth, throat, and lungs of the Badger have been modified to allow it to exhale a chemical spray that ignites on contact with air to create a powerful fire blast. The sheer size of the Badger makes for a far more devastating blast than normal.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Range: 50 feet (15.2 m).

Mega-Damage: 8D12 M.D. to a 10 foot (3 m) area.

Rate of Fire: Can be fired once per melee and counts as an additional attack per melee.

Payload: 18 blasts. One blast is regenerated every hour.

Bonus: +4 to strike, but this is the only bonus that applies to the Plasma Breath.

3. Shrieker Launchers (2): The Badger has a Shrieker Launcher mounted on each side of its snout. These special launchers are synced to the Badger's eye movements, so they are always locked on target with whatever the Badger is looking at. The launchers are equipped with a safety mechanism that prevents them from accidentally firing into the snout of the War Carrier. If, for example, the Badger is looking too far to the left, then the right launcher disengages and all shots are only fired from the left launcher. Once a target is tagged, the round transmits a special Bio-Comm signal up to a range of two miles (3.2 km). Any Bio-Tech weapon or device equipped with the proper Shrieker receiver can then track this signal to its source and target it with incredible accuracy (even without line of sight).

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Range: 1,000 feet (305 m).

Mega-Damage: 1D4 M.D.

Rate of Fire: Each shot counts as one attack per melee.

Duration: Once activated, a Shrieker round will broadcast its Bio-Comm signal for 4D6 minutes before it starves to death.

Payload: 10 Shrieker rounds per launcher (20 total). The Badger can regrow one spent Shrieker round every 4D6 minutes.

Bonus: +4 to strike.

4. Organic Rockets (50): Mounted beneath the thick bone armor on the back of the Badger War Carrier are multiple rows of Organic Rockets. This arrangement conceals the rockets and helps protect them from enemy fire. Half of the rockets are the common variety, and the other half have been specially enhanced to home in on the signal from Shrieker rounds. They both have the same basic capabilities, so the choice of which one to use is based on whether the target is marked or not. Once a target is tagged with a Shrieker round, the Shrieker-Targeting Rockets will hunt it down no matter where it goes. While this has its advantages, sometimes the Badger may need to attack an unmarked target.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

M.D.C. of the Rockets: 11 M.D.C. each. When still mounted on the Badger, the rocket is a small target and difficult to see among the bone armor which makes it -5 to hit on a "Called Shot." After launching, each missile is treated the same as a high-tech mini-missile and can be shot down as normal.

Range: 2 miles (3.2 km).

Mega-Damage: 5D10 M.D. damage with a 10 foot (3 m) blast radius.

Rate of Fire: One at a time or in volleys of 2, 4, 6, 8 or 10. Whether a single missile or an entire volley is fired, it counts as one melee attack. Roll once to strike, either all the missiles in the volley hit or they all miss.

Payload: 50 rockets, it takes 6D6 hours to regrow spent rockets.

Bonuses: +5 to strike and dodge.

5. Millipedoes (8): Millipedoes are Michelangelo's latest attempt to improve upon the concept of living cruise missiles. He realized that Kamikazes (see **The Rifter® #30**, page 47) were most effective when they were tracking down the signal from a Shrieker or Squealer as opposed to when they were allowed to select targets on their own, so he built the Millipedoes to solely rely on the signal from marked targets. This gave him some freedom when it came to their mental programming. Since he no longer needed them to be suicidal maniacs, he could program his new creations to engage in more intelligent tactics. Ultimately, they are not trying to sacrifice themselves, they are simply trying to fulfill their all-consuming desire to find the source of the signal and stop it. This means they will avoid obvious threats on their way to their objective and will even hide and use stealth to sneak past dangers. They will creep through thick underbrush, climb walls, crawl through sewers, tunnel under walls, or even chew through obstacles to reach their goal. They may travel much slower than Kamikaze Cruise Missiles, but they are difficult to spot and of course, they can crawl right under the Machine's anti-air batteries. The current batch of Millipedoes are equipped with lower grade explosives during this phase of testing. If they prove to be safe and effective, then they will ultimately be equipped with the same explosive charges found in Kamikazes. The Badger can carry eight of these experimental Bio-Tech missiles within the launchers mounted in its neck.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Anti-Building and Anti-Tank.

M.D.C. of each Millipede: 420 M.D.C.

Size: About 8 feet (2.4 m) long and 2 feet (0.6 m) wide. Weighs 350 pounds (157.5 kg).

Range: Millipedoes could theoretically travel hundreds of miles before getting tired, but they typically are used within a 2 mile (3.2 km) range.

Speed: 60 mph (96 km) maximum, but normal cruising speed is only 30 mph (48 km). The act of running does tire out the Millipede. It can run at top speed for up to two hours straight before needing to rest for 1D6x10+30 minutes.

Mega-Damage: Bite inflicts 4D6 M.D. Explosive blast inflicts 1D4x100 M.D. to a blast radius of 20 feet (6.1 m).

Rate of Fire: Launching each Millipede counts as one attack per melee.

Payload: 8 missiles.

Bonuses: +3 on initiative, +4 to strike, and +3 to dodge. Each missile has 3 attacks per melee as it tracks down its target.

6. Chemical Sprayers (4): As a member of the mustelid family, normal badgers possess anal scent glands that can produce a powerful smell-

ing chemical like a skunk. Michelangelo liked this natural defensive ability and created an enhanced version that would allow the Badger to deal with any kind of pursuer, both living and robotic. He created one gland that could spray out a cloud of burning acid and another gland that could spray out a powerful Bio-Toxin that temporarily paralyzes any organic technology it comes into contact with. They were so effective in tests that Michelangelo decided to add two additional sprayers to the front of the Badger so that it could use them during breaching maneuvers. The Burning Vapor cloud stays in the air for 1D4+1 melee rounds before it dissipates. The Bio-Paralyzer spray dissipates within seconds of being sprayed. The Badger is automatically immune to this spray, but passengers need to wait until the cloud disappears.

Primary Purpose: Defense.

Secondary Purpose: Assault.

Range: Can be sprayed up to 50 feet (15.2 m) away and each blast covers a 30 foot (9.1 m) area.

Mega-Damage: Burning Vapor Spray: Inflicts 3D6 M.D. per melee round to inorganic matter for 1D4+1 melee rounds, but the cloud only inflicts 2D6 S.D.C. damage to organic matter. Bio-Paralyzer Spray: Any Mega-Damage creature or Bio-Tech device exposed to the chemical must make a roll to save vs non-lethal poison of 16 or higher or else be completely paralyzed/stunned for 2D6 melee rounds. The chemical has no effect on normal humans and other S.D.C. creatures.

Rate of Fire: 4 blasts per melee.

Payload: Each Sprayer contains 3 blasts (6 blasts of each type of chemical total). All spent blasts regenerate every 24 hours.

Goliath War Mount

While many throughout Great House Artemis (and throughout much of the Resistance) consider Librarian Michelangelo to be an utter genius and the reason House Artemis is on the cutting edge of Bio-Technology, he is not the only Librarian crafting new designs for Great House Artemis. In fact, he is not even the senior-most Librarian within his own House, something that Constantine, the First Librarian of Great House Artemis, finds extremely irritating. He is not only the highest ranking among their Librarians, but also the *first Librarian* created by Great House Artemis. He has been around for a long time, and to see this "youngster" rise to prominence so quickly and overshadow his accomplishments is an incredible insult. While Constantine must admit (at least to himself) that Michelangelo is quite talented, that does not mean that this old dog is without a few tricks of his own. When not running his own complicated schemes and machinations, Constantine is still adding new creations to House Artemis' armory.

His latest War Mount design, the Goliath, is so impressive that many people believe it is one of Michelangelo's creations (easily infuriating Constantine). Of course, they have good reason to believe this. Several of the Goliath's most advanced features are experimental enhancements that Michelangelo created years ago. The most obvious of which is the Goliath's internal pilot compartment. This revolutionary new War Saddle was first used in the Stalker War Mount. Instead of seating the Outrider on top of the mount, the Saddle was designed to completely enclose the rider within the body of the War Mount. While Michelangelo used this War Saddle to hide the artificial nature of the Stalker and make it seem like a natural animal, Constantine wanted to make his creation a close-quarters brawler (most likely to compete with Michelangelo's latest creation, the Silverback War Mount), and he liked the way the internal pilot compartment protected the Outrider from the exposure and chaos of hand-to-hand combat. As with the Stalker, the major drawback is that the Outrider cannot use any of his Host Armor's mounted weapons or sensors while tucked snugly inside the Goliath, but the added protection more than makes up for this weakness. However, when the Goliath is running on all fours, it can unseal its back to allow the pilot to swing his upper body up into a seated configuration. This enables the



Outrider to add his own weapons and sensors to the mix, but it does open him up to increased risk. Most Outriders piloting Goliaths prefer to be unsealed when attacking at long-range and then slide forward into the internal compartment before plunging into close-quarters combat.

The basic design resembles a twenty foot (6.1 m) tall, armored bear, but the same enhancements that make it so deadly in close-quarters combat also make it look somewhat monstrous. Its thick pelt of fur is composed of thousands of razor sharp, quill-like scales rather than hair, and instead of natural looking claws, the Goliath has eighteen inch (0.45 m) long, sickle-shaped, High Frequency Blades mounted on its front paws. These wicked blades can quickly shred even the thickest armor, but it is the series of Ripper Blades mounted on its chest and forearms that make the Goliath so terrifying in battle. These organic chainsaws can be used to slash and swipe at targets, or they can be used to deliver the Goliath's patented bear hug. Once this powerful beast gets a good hold of its prey, it activates the Rippers and purées its victims in seconds. There are few things on this planet that can withstand this devastating attack for long.

This makes the Goliath a ferocious grappler, but focusing its attention against a single target in the midst of battle often leaves it open to attack from other opponents. However, it does possess several enhancements that protect it from this eventuality. The most useful of which is the Mount's impressive regenerative abilities. The Goliath can concentrate on tearing its prey to bits without too much concern for its own safety since it can heal from even the most grievous wounds in a matter of minutes. Of course, the Goliath cannot just sit back and take damage indefinitely, so Constantine included some other defensive enhancements that help keep the Mount safe. The quills covering its body not only prevent opponents from putting the Goliath in their own holds, but they can also be launched at nearby targets to further dissuade attackers. These are generally used against opponents that are attempting to strike the Goliath from the rear, but they can be fired in any direction.

The Goliath also possesses another unique enhancement that it can use to open up a little breathing room when the close-quarters action starts to get a bit overwhelming. The War Mount's mighty roar generates a powerful concussive shock wave that can send even the strongest robotic minions flying. This is another one of Michelangelo's ideas that Constantine appropriated for his War Mount. The Goliath's throat houses a new Biotechnology defense weapon that is able to absorb and harvest kinetic energy and then upon command, is able to immediately expel it in a channeled, directed concussive force. This concentrated discharge causes concussive damage, with effects ranging from a slight push, hard hit, a knockout, minor damage, up to bone and armor shattering major damage. It is not a long-ranged weapon and disperses rather quickly, but for the massive Goliath, it is a great way to get adversaries off of it while it focuses on shredding others. The other major downside is that the Goliath has to be inflicted with kinetic force before it can utilize this weapon.

Only a few dozen Goliaths have been produced so far in order to field test the design, but those tests have gone exceedingly well. The test teams have reported that the Goliath's ability to soak up damage is nearly as impressive as its ability to dish it out. In fact, several teams have nicknamed the War Mount the "Grisly Bear" after watching them gruesomely turn a few dozen alien predators into a fountain of blood and gore with their Ripper Blades. Constantine used a bit of his clout to get the Engineers growing Goliaths before they were even approved for mass production. He knew the design was strong and felt the usual testing process was just a formality (one he should not have endured in the first place). It should not be long before Goliaths start showing up all across the battlefield. So far, the genetic sequence has only been shared with a few other Great Houses that are in alliance with Artemis and Barren Marsh, but both Constantine and Warlord Artemis believe that once the other Houses get a glimpse of these monstrous brawlers in the field, the demand for them will soar.

Class: Heavy Close-quarters Assault War Mount.

Crew: One rider.

M.D.C. by Location:

Arms (2) – 280 each

Legs (2) – 410 each

Clawed Hands (2) – 130 each

Clawed Feet (2) – 160 each

Head – 310*

Main Body – 840*

Internal Pilot Compartment – 100**

* Depleting the M.D.C. of the Head or Main Body kills the Goliath.

** When in the close combat configuration, the pilot is completely sealed within the compartment. In this case, the M.D.C. of the Main Body must be depleted first and then the M.D.C. of the Pilot Compartment before the pilot can be targeted. When in the long-range configuration, the upper body of the pilot can be targeted as normal, but the legs are still completely protected within the compartment.

Speed:

Running: 190 mph (304 km) maximum, but normal cruising speed is only 70 mph (112 km). The act of running does tire out the War Mount but not the rider. The Goliath can run at top speed for up to one hour straight before needing to rest for 1D6x10+30 minutes. However, it can fight or trot along at cruising speed almost all day (20 hours) without needing rest.

Leaping: 15 feet high (4.6 m) or across, increase by 50% with a short running start and double when running at full speed.

Digging: 20 mph (32 km) through sand or dirt. 15 mph (24 km) through clay, rock or stone. Digging does not tire out the War Mount and it can dig an adequate hole to cover itself in 3D4 melees.

Swimming: 30 mph (48 km/26 knots).

Underwater Depth: Maximum depth is 1,000 feet (305 m).

Flying: Not possible.

Statistical Data:

Height: 20 feet (6.1 m) at full height, 9-11 feet (2.7 to 3.3 m) at the muscled shoulder hump when on all fours.

Width: 12 feet (3.7 m).

Length: 17-20 feet (5.2 to 6 m), with the hind legs being lower than the front legs.

Weight: 5-8 tons.

Cargo: Can carry 3.5 tons on its back or drag 11 tons behind it.

Physical Strength: 2D4+40.

Production Cycle: 3 year gestation period plus 6 year growth cycle.

Operational Lifetime: 60 year life span.

Trade Value: Experimental and highly sought after by many rival Great Houses. Any Great House on the planet (assuming they have the means) would pay 3D6x10 million credits for an undamaged Goliath War Mount with all its weapons and limbs intact. Of course, anyone caught selling a Goliath War Mount would be hunted down by House Artemis' Repo Men.

Bio-Regeneration Rate: 4D6 M.D.C. per melee round to the main body and 2D6+3 M.D.C. per melee round to all other locations.

Horror Factor: 16.

Feeding: The Goliath is a Carnivore. It needs to eat 60-100 pounds (27 to 45 kg) of animal matter a day, and may gorge up to one tenth of their total weight at one time. After gorging, the War Mount can go 2D4 days without feeding and without suffering any ill effects.

Color: The War Mount is typically light brown in color with black highlights, but may also come in solid black, dark Kodiak brown or Polar white color variants. **Note:** Goliaths on the smaller scale spectrum (5 tons or so) may also come in *Malaysian Sun Bear* variety – with shorter fur coat (Quill Defense maximum effective range reduced by half) and 24 inch (0.6 m) scythe claws (+10 M.D. to all front claw slash attacks/-3 to Horror Factor).

Sleep Requirements: As an artificially created organism, the Goliath only requires 4 hours of sleep per day.

Other Data:

An unmanned Goliath is able to operate independent of a rider using its animal-like intelligence and instincts to respond to any given situation. Considering how ferocious a Goliath is in battle, it is quite mild-mannered when operating on its own. It tends to keep to itself even when annoyed or pestered by others. Of course, if someone irritates and pushes the Goliath far enough, or threatens it, the creature makes them pay for their foolishness.

War Mount Attributes: I.Q. 1D4+4, M.E. 1D6+6, M.A. 2D4+8, P.S. 42-48, P.P. 2D6+10, P.E. 2D6+20, P.B. 3D6, Spd 190 mph (304 km) on the ground.

Number of Attacks per Melee: 5

Combat Bonuses: +3 on initiative, +6 to strike in hand to hand combat, +4 to parry, +4 to dodge, +4 to hold, +7 to roll with punch, +1 to pull punch, pin/incapacitate on a 17, 18, 19, or 20, and impervious to Horror Factor, disease, and poison.

Equivalent (Instinctive) Skills of Note: Climb 98%, Land Navigation 90%, Swim 70%, Track by Scent 60%, and Hunting 60%.

Combat Capabilities:

Restrained Claw Strike: 1D6 M.D.

Claw Strike: 1D6x10 M.D.

Power Claw Strike: 2D6x10 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Kick: 8D6 M.D.

Leap Kick: Not possible.

Bite: 7D8 M.D.

Head Butt: 5D6 M.D.

Bear Hug: 4D6x10 M.D. per melee attack for as long as the hold is maintained. The Goliath must first attempt to pin-incapacitate the target by rolling a 17, 18, 19, or 20 (including any P.P. attribute bonuses and the bonus of +4 to hold). Once the victim has been successfully incapacitated, the Goliath can begin inflicting damage on its next melee attack. At that point, both the victim and the Goliath roll twenty-sided dice and add in their P.P. attribute scores. The Goliath also gets a bonus of +4 to hold in addition to the P.P. bonus. High roll wins. If the Goliath wins, the hold continues and so does the damage. If the victim wins, then the bear hug is released and combat can continue (assuming the victim has not been completely ripped apart). It requires two melee attacks to initiate the hold. Maintaining the hold uses one melee attack each time.

Body Block/Ram: 6D8 M.D. and has a 01-60% likelihood of knocking an opponent as large as 20 feet (6.1 m) tall off of his feet and onto his back. If knocked off his feet, the victim loses initiative and two melee attacks. A ram counts as two attacks.

Senses and Features: Standard for War Mounts plus:

Quill Defense: The Goliath has a thick pelt of quills that covers most of its body. Each quill is a bit shorter than those from the standard enhancement (about 4 to 6 inches/10 to 15 cm), but there are thousands more. The quills inflict 3D6 M.D. to anyone grappling with the Goliath or trying to apply a hold, squeeze attack, body block or pounce/leap attack to the War Mount. Likewise, adversaries throwing a punch or kick at the Goliath will inflict damage, but take 1D6 M.D. in return from the sharp bed of quills. The quills can also be used as weapons. Extending them in conjunction with a punch, elbow, knee, kick, forearm, or back-hand attack adds 1D6 M.D. to the Goliath's normal punch/kick damage.

Regeneration: Super. Fingers, toes, eyes, and ears regenerate in 4D6+10 hours. The paws and feet regenerate in 6D6+30 hours, and an entire limb can regenerate in 4D6+4 days. Cannot regrow a heart or brain, but can regenerate a sick or damaged one.

Bio-Weapon Systems:

1. Ripper Blades (5): The Goliath possesses five Ripper Blades mounted along its body, one on each forearm and three on the chest. Each Ripper is composed of a thick mass of bone, muscle, and sinew with multiple rows of two inch (5 cm) long shark teeth lining the edge. Powerful muscle contractions rapidly move these teeth back and forth, which creates the Bio-Tech equivalent of a chainsaw. Unlike a high-tech chainsaw, a Ripper Blade is almost completely silent (at

least until it starts tearing its prey apart). This deadly blade shreds its target on contact, leaving a wicked looking two inch (5 cm) wide wound (or four inches/10 cm wide from the larger blade) that is very slow to heal; heals at one quarter the normal rate. The two on the forearms are roughly the same size as the ones on each side of the chest, but the one that runs down the center of the Goliath is nearly twice as thick and more than double the length. Individually, they inflict impressive damage, but when the Goliath grabs a victim in a bear hug and activates all five at once, they obliterate nearly anything they come in contact with. This attack can also be used against targets that are much larger than the Goliath. For instance, the War Mount can hop on the back of a Land Dominator, grab hold, and start shredding, but the damage inflicted is only half because the Goliath cannot apply nearly as much pressure.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: Each smaller blade inflicts 5D8 M.D. per slash and the larger blade inflicts 1D6x10 per slash. Bear Hug 4D6x10 M.D. per melee attack until the victim can break free of the hold.

Rate of Fire: Up to two Ripper Blades can engage the same target simultaneously (counts as one melee attack). A bear hug requires two melee attacks to initiate the hold. Maintaining the hold uses one melee attack each time.

2. Quill Launchers: Every single quill on the Goliath's body is a short-range weapon sitting in its own micro-launcher. They can pretty much only fire in a single direction, but the Goliath can easily aim at a specific target by launching the proper quills that are facing it.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Range: 50 feet (15.2 m).

Mega-Damage: 1D6 M.D. per single quill. A burst of eight does 5D6 M.D., or a burst of 15 inflicts 1D6x10 M.D. The quills can also be used to spray a 20 foot (6.1 m) area, but without any bonuses to strike. Each target is typically only hit with a couple quills, which inflicts 2D6 M.D.

Number of Attacks: Each single shot or volley counts as one melee attack. The radius blast counts as three attacks.

Payload: Effectively unlimited, as the Goliath is covered in quills, and each one re-grows within just 10 minutes.

Bonuses: +3 to strike for a single quill. +1 to strike with a burst and no bonus for a radius blast. These are the only bonuses that apply to the Quill Launcher.

3. Shock Wave Roar: The Goliath is able to produce a powerful sonic shock wave with its roar. It does not provide long-range firepower, but when utilized in close range it can knock even the strongest opponents off of their feet and send them flying 6D6 feet (1.8 to 11 m) away. This weapon is primarily used to fend off other adversaries when the Goliath is busily shredding an opponent with its bear hug. It is also an excellent way to knock an opponent off balance so the Goliath can more easily close the distance.

Primary Purpose: Defense.

Secondary Purpose: Assault.

Range: 40 feet (24.4 m).

Mega-Damage: 2D6 M.D. per blast to everything within a 15 foot (4.6 m) area. In addition, the blast has a 01-65% likelihood of knocking an opponent as large as 20 feet (6.1 m) tall off of his feet and onto his back, plus the shock wave pushes them 6D6 feet away. If knocked off their feet, the victims lose initiative and two melee attacks. There is also a 01-80% likelihood that any handheld weapons and loose items will be knocked off of the targets and sent flying 2D4x10 feet (6.1 to 12.2 m) away them.

Number of Attacks: This attack can only be used once per melee round, but it counts as an extra attack per melee.

Payload: Effectively unlimited, but can only be used once per melee round.

Bonuses: +4 to strike. This is the only bonus that applies to the Shock Wave Roar.

Silverback War Mount

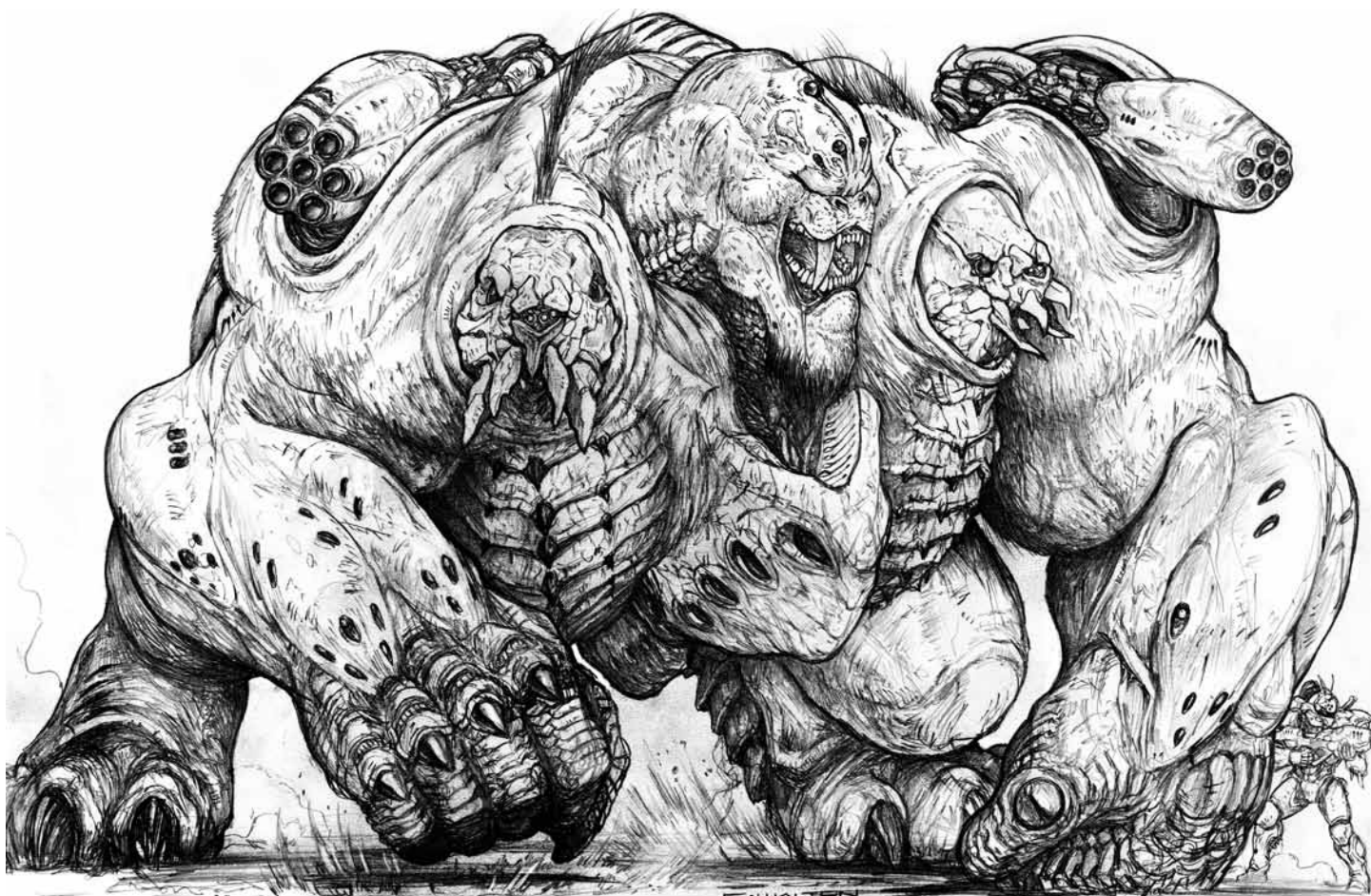
Michelangelo, the Second Librarian of House Artemis, is often described as being a creative genius and has mastered Bio-Technology to such an impressive degree that even his fellow Librarians are envious of his skills. He is the mind behind most of Artemis' cutting edge Bio-Tech designs, and he is one of the key people responsible for House Artemis' dramatic shift in battlefield tactics. Previously, they (like most Great Houses throughout the Resistance) focused on smaller, more mobile War Mounts to allow their teams to strike quickly and then fade away before the Machine could muster a counterattack. Michelangelo began designing and testing larger, more powerful War Mounts without authorization because he believed that while these hit and fade tactics had their place, they would never be enough to win the war. The Resistance needed powerful War Mounts that were capable of standing their ground against overwhelming odds. Not only would this be necessary to give them a chance when fighting the Machine on her turf, or providing heavy field support for strike teams, but they also needed some powerhouses on their side to hold off the inevitable invasions of their underground havens. Michelangelo thought his argument had merit, but he decided to show the wisdom of his beliefs through actions rather than words. His initial giant War Mount designs like the Kraken and Juggernaut made such an impact on the war effort in this Area of Influence that Warlord Artemis authorized him to go forward with more of his ideas.

One such concept is the massive brawler known as the Silverback War Mount. This enormous, armored gorilla-looking beast stands over 35 feet (10.7 m) tall when at full height, and even hunched forward on its knuckles, it stands 25 feet (7.6 m) tall. This colossal simian was built with one purpose in mind, to quickly close the distance with its opponents and pound them into submission (though some might argue, into oblivion). It is equipped with a pair of shoulder-mounted Super Light Cell Cannons to engage targets at long-range, but it is far more dangerous up close. Its tremendous size and strength allow it to smash most machines into scrap with just a few well placed punches, but it also possesses some powerful enhancements that make it absolutely devastating in close combat.

Aside from its powerful bite, its main weapons in close combat are its supernaturally strong hands, so Michelangelo made sure to enhance them with the proper tools to make them even more destructive. The hands, wrists, and forearms are heavily reinforced and the knuckles on each hand end in enormous spikes which increase the damage of each punch, but these spikes can also be made to shoot out on impact directly into the target. Spent spikes grow back quickly, but this attack can still only be used a limited number of times. To ensure the Silverback is never without its best weapons, Michelangelo also enhanced the bottom of its hands so that they can generate a powerful concussive blast on impact. This enables the Silverback to deliver a deadly barrage of hammer strikes while the knuckle spikes regenerate. The concussion blasts also have a limited payload, but alternating back and forth between both types of attacks usually provides enough time for them to regenerate.

To further enhance the Silverback's close-quarters prowess, it also possesses a pair of strange experimental pods on each shoulder. These insect-like creatures are capable of spraying nearby opponents with a super-cold fluid, similar to liquid nitrogen only far colder. This cryo-fluid can be used against organic targets, but it is far more effective against robotic adversaries. When sprayed on a robotic target, its joints start to freeze and stiffen, which does slow it down somewhat, but most importantly, it makes the robot's metallic armor extremely brittle. This combined with the Silverback's powerful strikes is what makes it so devastating in close combat.

Of course, it needs to close the distance first. To help the Silverback safely charge into hand-to-hand range, it has a small orb mounted on its forehead that can project a powerful point defense force field. This strange field may only protect the front of the War Mount, but by concentrating the energy of the field, it makes it far more durable. The field also has a secondary benefit. When this high-energy field comes into



contact with another person, creature, or machine (generally whatever the Silverback was charging towards), its energies are discharged completely into the target, which temporarily stuns it, allowing the Silverback to unleash its first salvo of attacks against a diminished opponent.

There are currently only a handful of Silverbacks within House Artemis' armory, but they have already proven their effectiveness in the field and have been fast tracked for introduction throughout the armed forces. Dozens more are currently incubating in leathery egg sacks and hundreds more have been slated for generation in Gene Pools. Warlord Artemis has already sold the genetic code to a few of his most trusted Great House allies across the planet, and he is debating on distributing it to dozens more to hopefully give the Resistance an edge as the war with the Machine continues to escalate.

Class: Heavy Close-Quarters Assault War Mount.

Crew: One rider.

M.D.C. by Location:

- Arms (2) – 440 each
- Legs (2) – 550 each
- Hands (2) – 260 each
- Prehensile Feet (2) – 100 each
- Cryo Spray Projectors (2) – 230 each
- Super Light Cell Cannons (2) – 180 each
- Head – 420*
- Main Body – 1,250*
- Stun Shield – 800
- Rider's War Saddle – 100**

* Depleting the M.D.C. of the Head or Main Body kills the Silverback.

** In order to strike the rider, an attacker must first destroy the War Saddle.

Speed:

Running: 120 mph (192 km) maximum, but normal cruising speed is only 50 mph (80 km). The act of running does tire out the War Mount

but not the rider. The Silverback can run at top speed for up to one hour straight before needing to rest for 1D6x10+30 minutes. However, it can fight or trot along at cruising speed almost all day (20 hours) without needing rest.

Leaping: 30 feet (9 m) high or across, increase by 50% with a short running start and double when running at full speed.

Digging: 15 mph (24 km) through sand or dirt. 10 mph (16 km) through clay, rock or stone. Digging does not tire out the War Mount and it can dig an adequate hole to cover itself in 3D4 melees.

Swimming: 20 mph (32 km).

Underwater Depth: Maximum depth is 1,000 feet (305 m).

Flying: Not possible.

Statistical Data:

Height: 35 feet (10.6 m) at full height, 25-28 feet (7.6 to 8.5 m) when hunched over on knuckles.

Width: 22-25 feet (6.7 to 7.6 m).

Length: 15 feet (4.6 m).

Weight: 10 to 12 tons.

Cargo: Can carry 6 tons on its back or drag 10 tons behind it.

Physical Strength: 2D4+60.

Production Cycle: Four year gestation period plus nine year growth cycle.

Operational Lifetime: 50-year life span.

Trade Value: Experimental and highly sought after by many forces outside of Great House Artemis. Any Great House on the planet (assuming they have the means) would pay 5D6x10 million credits for an undamaged Silverback War Mount with all its weapons and limbs intact. Of course, anyone caught selling a Silverback War Mount would be hunted down by House Artemis' Repo Men.

Bio-Regeneration Rate: 8D6 per hour to the main body and 4D6 per hour to all other locations.

Horror Factor: 16

Feeding: The Silverback is a Carnivore. It needs to eat 100-250 pounds (45 kg to 112.5 kg) of animal matter a day, and may gorge on up to 600

pounds (270 kg) at one time. After gorging, the War Mount can go 2D4 days without feeding and without suffering any ill effects.

Color: The mount is dark gray in color with silver highlights on its back.

Sleep Requirements: As an artificially created organism, the Silverback only requires 4 hours of sleep per day.

Other Data:

An unmanned Silverback is able to operate independent of a rider using its animal-like intelligence and instincts to respond to any given situation. It is naturally aggressive and frequently tries to exert its dominance among other War Mounts, Gore Hounds, and Splicers in Host Armor. It rarely attacks others outright, but it will growl, roar, make threatening movements, and even bat them about “gently” in order to get them to back down. If the recipient of this display chooses to fight back right away then the violence can quickly escalate. Only Outriders and Packmasters seem to be immune to these games. They are also the only ones that can get a Silverback to calm down when it attempts to exert dominance over another Gore Hound, War Mount, or Splicer.

War Mount Attributes: I.Q. 1D6+3, M.E. 1D6+8, M.A. 3D4+8, P.S. 62-68, P.P. 2D6+8, P.E. 2D6+20, P.B. 3D6, Spd 120 mph (192 km) on the ground.

Number of Attacks per Melee: 4

Combat Bonuses: +3 on initiative, +6 to strike in hand to hand combat, +3 to parry, +1 to dodge, +6 to roll with punch, +4 to pull punch, critical strike on an unmodified 18, 19, or 20, and impervious to Horror Factor, disease, and poison.

Equivalent (Instinctive) Skills of Note: Climb 98%, Land Navigation 90%, Swim 70%, Track by Scent 60%, and Hunting 60%.

Combat Capabilities:

Restrained Punch: 2D6 M.D.

Punch: 1D6x10+10 M.D.

Power Punch: 2D6x10+20 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Hammer Punch: +4D6 M.D. to punch or power punch damage.

Knuckle Spike Launch: +2D4x10 M.D. to punch or power punch damage.

Kick: 1D4x10+10 M.D.

Stomp: 5D8 M.D.

Bite: 7D8 M.D.

Crush/Tear: 5D8 M.D.

Two Handed Tear: 2D4x10 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Head Butt: 5D6 M.D.

Body Block/Ram: 6D8 M.D. and has a 01-70% likelihood of knocking an opponent as large as 40 feet (12.2 m) tall, off of his feet and onto his back. If knocked off his feet, the victim loses initiative and two melee attacks. A ram counts as two attacks.

Senses and Features: Standard for War Mounts plus:

Armored Eyes: The Silverback is expected to mix it up with heavy resistance at close range, so it was given four armored eyes to give it some redundant backups when it inevitably loses a few eyes in battle. Each eye has a hard transparent lid that slides into place when necessary to protect them from damage.

Prehensile Feet: The Silverback's feet are prehensile which allows it to grasp and hold objects. They are not developed enough to throw or fire weapons with any degree of accuracy (-6 to strike), but they do improve the climbing ability and acrobatic skills of the War Mount.

Reinforced Exoskeleton.

Bio-Weapon Systems:

1. Super Light Cell Cannons (2): The cannons mounted on the shoulders are clusters of Super Light Cells, each cannon containing seven cells. When activated, all seven cells of the cannon fire in unison to unleash a devastating blast. Both cannons can engage the same target simultaneously for an even greater attack.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Range: 2,000 feet (610 m).

Mega-Damage: A blast from a single Super Light Cell Cannon inflicts 1D6x10+10 M.D. A simultaneous blast from both cannons inflicts 2D6x10+20 M.D.

Rate of Fire: Both single and dual blasts count as one attack per melee round.

Payload: Effectively unlimited.

Bonus: +1 to strike on an aimed shot only.

2. Armored Gauntlets (2): Both hands are heavily reinforced and equipped with multiple enhancements to allow for more devastating punches and hammer strikes. The spikes on the knuckles of each hand can be made to fire into the target on impact, for a point-blank attack that inflicts massive damage. The spikes regenerate quickly, but it still takes 1D4 melee rounds. The bottoms of the hands can also deliver powerful concussive blasts when slammed down on targets with hammer strikes. These blasts also have a limited payload but regenerate at a much faster rate.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Mega-Damage: Knuckle Spike Launch: adds 2D4x10 M.D. to punch or power punch damage. Concussive Blast: adds 4D6 M.D. to punch or power punch damage.

Number of Attacks: Equal to the number of attacks per melee.

Payload: Knuckle Spike Launch: There are four spikes on each hand. All the spikes on the hand are launched on impact. Spent spikes regenerate after 1D4 melee rounds. Concussive Blasts: 20 blasts per hand (40 blasts total). 1D4 blasts are regenerated every melee round.

3. Cryo Spray Projectors (2): The strange bug-like creatures mounted in each shoulder are capable of projecting a blast of intensely cold liquid. It inflicts minor damage to living targets, but it is far more effective when used against robotic targets.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Range: 50 feet (15.2 m).

Mega-Damage: Against living targets, the cryo spray inflicts 3D6 M.D. every melee round for 1D4 melees and penalties of -3 to strike, parry, and dodge for 1D4 melee rounds.

Against robots, the cryo spray does not inflict any damage, but it makes their armor weak and brittle, leaving them more vulnerable to kinetic attacks. For 1D4 melee rounds, physical impacts from punches, kicks, bullets, rail gun rounds, falls, and explosions inflict double damage. Their joints are also stiff and less responsive which causes penalties of -2 to strike, parry, and dodge for 1D4 melee rounds; plus their armor becomes brittle and fragile. While in this state, kinetic impacts like those from punches, explosions, and rail gun rounds inflict double damage.

Number of Attacks: Equal to the number of attacks per melee.

Payload: Each Cryo Spray Projector contains enough liquid for 5 blasts (10 blasts total). One spent blast regenerates every 5 minutes.

Bonuses: +3 to strike. This is the only bonus that applies to the projectors.

4. Stun Shield Projector: The seemingly innocuous orb in the Silverback's forehead is capable of projecting a point defense force field that protects the front of the War Mount as it charges its prey. The field also serves an offensive function. Once the force field makes contact with another living creature or robot, it completely discharges into the target, stunning it temporarily. This causes the field to drop immediately, and cannot be reactivated for 1D4 melee rounds. The Silverback needs to disengage the shield anyway to attack its prey, so it generally prefers to endure this slight inconvenience in order to weaken its prey. Simply roll to strike with a body block/tackle to see if the field hits the intended target. The target must then roll a 16 or higher to save against stun. On a failed roll, the victim loses 3 attacks per melee and is -6 to strike, parry, and dodge for one entire melee round. On a successful save, the victim is only -1 to strike, parry, and dodge for one melee round.

Primary Purpose: Defense.

Secondary Purpose: Assault.

Range: Five feet (1.5 m).

Mega-Damage: None, other than stun penalties.

Payload: The stun field must have at least 100 M.D.C. to inflict stun penalties. Once the field makes contact, it cannot be reactivated for 1D4 melee rounds.



Stalker War Mount

The Stalker is the latest War Mount design to come from the pioneering Librarians of House Artemis. It combines the DNA from a half dozen jungle cats and a handful of alien species with some of the latest breakthroughs in Bio-Weapon technology. This cunning predator is enhanced with a Stealth Field and adhesive pads on its feet so that it can hunt its prey from the shadows and then strike from nearly any angle. Only the most loyal Outriders and Skinjobs are ever entrusted with this prototype War Mount, typically becoming devoted Stalker Pilots or part of a *Pride Squadron*. This is done in the hopes of keeping its top secret weapon designs from falling into the hands of rival Great Houses, but more importantly, to hide the War Mount's real purpose. Most people within the Resistance believe that House Artemis created the Stalker as a clandestine War Mount for commando missions and surgical strikes (which is one purpose), but in truth, they designed this mount to be used against other Splicers.

One of House Artemis' dirty little secrets that few know about is that they were the original creators of the Abomination War Mount (see **The Rifter® #30**, page 47). They designed it to give their House the edge during Blood Feuds, but a handful of rogue Outriders took their duties a bit overzealously and used these monstrous War Mounts to commit all manner of terrible atrocities. House Artemis buried these Outriders and this terrible secret, but that did not end the need for an anti-Splicer War Mount. The Librarians went back to the drawing board to craft a mount that would be effective against Biotechnology but still devastating against the Machine.

Michelangelo, the Second Librarian of House Artemis, came up with a sleek, new design that met all these needs perfectly. While the Abomination was given a horrific insect-like appearance so that it would be psychologically terrifying, the Stalker was modeled after the deadly grace and beauty of jungle cats. Michelangelo wanted to stay as far away from the hidden legacy of the Abomination as possible, but he still wanted to incorporate some of the strengths that made that War Mount

so deadly, like its incredible agility, Stealth Field, and its ability to cling to nearly any surface and strike from any angle.

He also wanted his new mount to look as much like a real jungle cat as possible. The Librarian noticed that the Machine tends to leave animals in the wild alone, and he hoped a more natural looking creature would be able to prowl across the surface without drawing attention. Michelangelo began by combining the strengths of some of the deadliest feline predators like lions, tigers, smilodons, leopards, cougars, and jaguars. From there, he took their natural strength, speed, agility, climbing skills, and hunting instincts and enhanced them to extraordinary levels. The end result looks similar to a normal clouded leopard, only much larger and robust. He even redesigned the War Saddle to maximize the illusion. Instead of sitting on the back of the Stalker, the Outrider lies face down inside of the War Mount in a specially designed pilot's compartment. While this does protect the pilot completely, it does have some drawbacks. While operating in what is known as the stealth configuration, the pilot cannot use any of his own Host Armor mounted weapons and sensors. However, the pilot can unseal the back of the Stalker and swing his body up into the attack configuration to bring the full power of the duo to bear. When in this configuration, he looks more like a standard mounted rider, except his legs are still concealed within the War Mount instead of straddling the sides. It is a revolutionary new design that Michelangelo hopes to incorporate into future War Mounts, although the hollow frame does make the beast a bit less durable.

The fur of the War Mount was another unique creation of Michelangelo's. He wanted to move away from the thickly-armored appearance common to most War Mounts so that it would look like a natural feline, but unfortunately, the Stealth Field enhancement would not work with normal fur. He created layers of short ceramic spines that not only gave the look of fur (even up close), but they also provided some measure of defensive protection. This thick pelt of tough spines shields the War Mount from damage, plus the Stalker can flare them out like a porcupine's quills to damage enemies that attempt to grapple with it. When the Stalker is relaxed, the spines are light gray or black in color, giving it the natural camouflage pattern of a clouded leopard, but when on the prowl, the spines change colors slightly to match the surrounding area. It is like a mild version of the Chameleon Skin Bio-Enhancement that naturally engages when the War Mount is hunting its prey. The Stalker still has the option to activate its more powerful Stealth Field for when it really wants to hide its presence.

The Stalker can use its powerful talons to climb rough surfaces like trees and steep cliffs, but it also has sticky hairs and suction cups on the pads of its feet that allow it to effortlessly cling to any surface. It can run straight up a glass wall or even upside down along a ceiling at incredible speeds. Stalkers have a relatively thick hide beneath their fur, but Michelangelo decided against equipping the War Mount with heavier armor plating in order to keep it quick and agile. It can move at amazing speeds along nearly any surface, and it can perform acrobatic maneuvers that seem impossible for a creature of its size. Its natural propensity to stalk prey from the shadows was made even more deadly with the inclusion of a Stealth Field. Similar to Skinjobs, the Stalker is able to strike from anywhere at any time and then simply vanish before its prey can even consider a counterattack. Stalkers love to sneak up on their prey and attack at close range, but these beasts also possess formidable long-range weaponry.

Michelangelo took great pride in his new creation and wanted to equip it with his latest Bio-Weapon designs. While he was finishing up the final details on the Stalker, he was also designing Shrieker weapons which are based on a system of specialized rounds emitting a specific Bio-Comm signal that other Bio-Weapons can use as a targeting beacon. The Librarian saw great promise in this new weapon system, and he decided to equip the Stalker with Shrieker rounds before they were even field-tested. Both the Stalker and these tracking rounds have more than proven themselves in the field, and Michelangelo was glad he took this gamble. He wanted to keep the Stalker streamlined like a real jungle cat, so he did not want to add any obvious weapon barrels. Instead, he incorporated his Shrieker rounds right into the Stalker's claws. Each claw is

an individual tracer round. They can be fired from the paw with impressive range and accuracy, or the Stalker can choose to detach a single claw inside its target after a successfully swipe from its mighty paw.

Stalkers can mark targets for other Splicers to destroy or it can attack using its own special Shrieker-seeking munitions. Hidden beneath its fur are rows of mini-organic rockets known as Rocket Rounds. These explosive smart rounds can change their trajectory in mid-flight in order to home in on targets marked with Shrieker rounds. This allows the Stalker to mark its prey and then fade into the shadows where it can obliterate its target without fear of reprisals. The Stalker can also tag a target with a Shrieker and then follow this inaudible Bio-Comm signal from up to a mile (1.6 km) away. This is where the Stalker earned its name and its terrifying reputation as an unrelenting and inescapable predator. Many victims have thought they successfully shook this vicious hunter from their trail only to learn the horrible truth at the end of its claws and fangs.

What further adds to its fearsome reputation is the fact that few Splicers that have faced a Stalker have survived. Most assume it is because of their formidable hunting skills and Stealth Field, but Stalkers also contain a secret weapon that gives them a distinct edge against living opponents. It is a secret that few Splicers outside of elite assassins like Skinjobs, even know exist. The Stalker is capable of delivering a virulent Bio-Toxin through its large saber teeth or via special poisonous spine launchers mounted beneath the skin on its shoulders. There are various types of toxins, but each one is incredibly effective against living creatures and Bio-Technology. Some toxins can disable the natural healing abilities of Bio-Tech while others cause mind-numbing agony or temporary paralysis. The poisonous spines are completely silent when fired, so even those that have witnessed a Stalker use them to finish off another Splicer simply assumed the beast got the upper hand through other means. Warlord Artemis is hoping to keep this technology a secret, but the growing danger from threats like Great House Shiva, Great House Charlemagne, House Janus, and Waste Crawler gangs has necessitated a dramatic increase in Stalker production. It is only a matter of time before Great House Artemis faces this beast or its Bio-Toxins in battle.

Class: Covert Assault War Mount.

Crew: One rider.

M.D.C. by Location:

Front Legs (2) – 140 each

Hind Legs (2) – 190 each

Paws (4) – 75 each

Tail – 65

* Head – 180

* Main Body – 320

** Internal Pilot Compartment – 50

* Depleting the M.D.C. of the Head or Main Body kills the Stalker.

** When in the stealth configuration, the pilot is completely sealed within the compartment. In this case, the M.D.C. of the Pilot Compartment must be depleted first before the pilot can be targeted. When in the attack configuration, the upper body can be targeted as normal, but the legs are still completely protected within the compartment.

Speed:

Running: 240 mph (384 km) maximum, but normal cruising speed is only 100 mph (160 km). The act of running does tire out the War Mount but not the rider. The Stalker can run at top speed for up to two hours straight before needing to rest for 1D6x10+30 minutes. However, it can fight or trot along at cruising speed almost all day (20 hours) without needing rest. The War Mount was built to climb and it can run up a sheer cliff or even upside down along a ceiling at 90 mph (144 km).

Leaping: 80 feet (24.4 km) high or across, increase by 50% with a short running start and double when running at full speed.

Digging: 20 mph (32 km) through sand or dirt. 10 mph (16 km) through clay, rock or stone. Digging does not tire out the War Mount and it can dig an adequate hole to cover itself in 2D4 melees.

Swimming: 40 mph (64 km or 34 knots); dog paddle or otter-like underwater.

Underwater Depth: Maximum depth is 200 feet (61 m).

Flying: Not possible.

Statistical Data:

Height: 7-8 feet (2.1 to 2.4 m) at the shoulder.

Width: 4-5 feet (1.2 to 1.5 m) shoulder to shoulder.

Length: 12 feet (3.6 m) with a 6 foot (1.8 m) long tail.

Weight: 1.0 to 1.2 tons.

Cargo: Can carry 600 lbs (270 kg) within its internal pilot compartment plus an additional 800 lbs (360 kg) on its back or drag 2,600 lbs (1,170 kg) behind it.

Physical Strength: 1D4+36.

Production Cycle: 2 year gestation period plus 2 year growth cycle.

Operational Lifetime: 50 year life span.

Bio-Regeneration Rate: 6D6 per hour to the main body and 3D6 per hour to all other locations.

Horror Factor: 15, 17 for a Pride Squadron of four or more against humans, none against machines.

Feeding: The Stalker is a Carnivore. It needs to eat 30-60 pounds (13.5 to 27 kg) of animal matter a day, and may gorge on up to 300 pounds (135 kg) at one time. After gorging, the War Mount can go 2D4 days without feeding and without suffering any ill effects.

Color: The spiny fur of the War Mount can vary from a light gray, mint or rust with black spots and stripes, giving it a natural camouflage pattern, but it can also change color to match its surroundings. Upon rare occasion a Stalker is born solid melanistic black and are called Panthers. The eyes are always blood red in color.

Sleep Requirements: As an artificially created organism, the Stalker only requires 4 hours of sleep per day.

Other Data:

An unmanned Stalker is able to operate independent of an Outrider using its animal-like intelligence and instincts to respond to any given situation. It is a natural hunter that loves testing its skills on the battlefield. Stalkers are patient predators that prefer to wait for the perfect moment to strike rather than just rush in, and it will develop an affinity for any Splicers that use the same tactics. It recognizes robots as natural enemies and will attack them on its own, but only if it feels the time is right. Sometimes misinterpreted by others that these beasts are cowards, Stalkers just prefer to wait until it can take advantage of its strengths. A Stalker will attack numerically superior forces, but only if the terrain allows it to use hit and fade tactics. It will come to the aid of a human in danger, but once again, only if the situation is ideal. It finds overwhelming odds fun and challenging, but it will not leap into impossible odds unless commanded to do so by an Outrider or Packmaster. Cornered Stalkers have been likened to that of a furious tornado with claws and fangs slashing everywhere.

Alignment: Anarchist. The Stalker loves hunting, fighting, and toying with its prey. Dangerous enemies are dealt with quickly and efficiently, but when it comes across a less than challenging adversary, it likes to have a little fun before finishing the job. Its attitude borders on arrogance and this mindset usually wears off on the Outrider.

War Mount Attributes: I.Q. 1D6+3, M.E. 1D6+4, M.A. 3D4+8, P.S. 37-40, P.P. 2D6+8, P.E. 2D6+14, P.B. 3D6, Spd 240 mph (384 km) on the ground.

Number of Attacks per Melee: 5

Combat Bonuses: +3 on initiative, +5 to strike in hand to hand combat, +4 to parry, +3 to automatic dodge, +2 to entangle, +6 to roll with punch, +3 to pull punch, +2 to disarm, and impervious to Horror Factor, disease, and poison.

Equivalent (Instinctive) Skills of Note: Climb 98%, Land Navigation 90%, Prowl 90%, Swim 70%, Track by Scent 80%, and Hunting 90%.

Combat Capabilities:

Restrained Claw Strike: 1D6x10+10 S.D.C.

Claw Strike: 5D8 M.D.

Power Claw Strike: 2D4x10 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Rear Leg Kick: 8D6 M.D.

Double Rear Leg Kick: 10D6+20 M.D., but counts as two attacks.

Leap Kick: Not possible.

Bite: 6D8 M.D.

Head Butt: 3D6 M.D.

Body Block/Ram: 4D8 M.D. and has a 01-60% likelihood of knocking an opponent who is as large as 20 feet (6.1 m) tall off of his feet and onto his back. If knocked off his feet, the victim loses initiative and two melee attacks/actions, and the Stalker is poised for a fast bite attack (+2 to strike for the Feline's next attack). A ram counts as two attacks.

Running Leap Attack: 6D8 M.D., and has a 01-85% likelihood of knocking down an opponent and counts as two attacks, otherwise the same as Body Block/Ram.

Senses and Features: Standard for War Mounts plus:

Internal Pilot Compartment: The special pilot compartment has two configurations: *Stealth* and *Attack*. When in *Stealth* configuration, the pilot is completely concealed within the body of the War Mount. This not only protects the pilot from attack, but it also makes the Stalker look more like a natural animal, which means the mount is less likely to draw Machine attention. When operating in *stealth* configuration in a wilderness setting, there is only a 01-15% chance that random Machine patrols will harass the Stalker. (**Note:** This bonus is negated by any obvious Bio-Enhancements like additional weapons barrels, exoskeletons, horns, etc.). However, the *stealth* configuration does have its drawbacks. The pilot cannot use any Host Armor mounted weapons and sensors when concealed within the Stalker (no bonuses from optical and sensory Bio-Enhancements). When in *Attack* configuration, the back of the Stalker unseals to allow the pilot to lift up into a seated position. The upper body is exposed and can be targeted as normal, but the legs are still concealed within the War Mount. The pilot may not be as protected in this configuration, but he can bring all of his weapons and sensory enhancements to bear. Switching between the *stealth* and *attack* configurations takes two melee actions.

Stealth Field: The field makes the War Mount and rider semi-invisible. The Stalker is 90% undetectable when standing still, 80% when moving slow, 60% moving at a walking pace or slower, and only 33% when moving at full speed. Invisible to infrared optics, thermal-imaging systems, heat sensors, and nightvision.

Suction Cups and Gripping Hairs: The pads of the feet are equipped with suction cups that can grip any smooth surface (polished metal, glass, plastic, etc.) and gripping hairs that can cling to the rough surfaces that the suction cups cannot (concrete, rock, wood, etc.). The Stalker can run along walls or ceilings with a maximum speed of 90 mph (144 km). The War Mount can only hold 800 lbs (360 kg) when climbing or upside down.

Hear Shrieker Signals: In addition to the Stalker's weapons, the War Mount itself is equipped with a special Bio-Comm receiver that allows it to follow the inaudible signal given off by any Shrieker round up to one mile away (1.6 km) or up to six miles (9.6m) away for any Squealer.

Righting Reflex: The Stalker can automatically right itself in mid-fall and land on its feet. Takes no damage from any fall less than fifty feet (15.2 m), takes only half damage from falls between 50-1,000 feet (15.2 to 305 m), and falls from a height greater than 1,000 feet (305 m) requires a successful roll with impact to reduce damage by half.

Spiny Fur: The odorless fur of the Stalker is made up of layers of thin yet durable ceramic spines. These spines naturally change color to match the surrounding area, but the Stalker can also activate its full *Stealth Field* for superior camouflage. In addition, these hard spines act as a layer of protective armor, plus they damage any enemies that try to grapple or pin the War Mount. Inflicts 2D6 M.D. to anyone attempting to wrestle or apply any type of hold on the Stalker.

Bio-Weapon Systems:

1. Shrieker Rounds (20): The claws are Shrieker tracking rounds. They can be fired one at a time from the paws or the Stalker can detach one inside its target during a claw strike. Once a target is tagged, the

round transmits a special Bio-Comm signal up to a range of one mile (1.6 km). Any Bio-Tech weapon or device equipped with the proper Shrieker receiver can then track this signal to its source and target it with incredible accuracy (even without line of sight). The Stalker generally prefers to use the front paws to tag targets from a distance and the back claws to mark prey in close combat. A favorite tactic is to cling to a wall or tree above its prey and then quickly plant a tracer with a rear leg kick.

Primary Purpose: Assault and Defense.

Secondary Purpose: Tracking.

Range: 1,000 feet (305 m).

Mega-Damage: 1D4 M.D.

Rate of Fire: Each shot or claw strike counts as one attack per melee.

Duration: Once activated, a Shrieker round will broadcast its Bio-Comm signal for 4D6 minutes before it starves to death.

Bonuses: +2 to strike.

Payload: 20 Shrieker rounds. The Stalker can regrow one spent Shrieker round every 4D6 minutes.

2. Rocket Rounds (2): Hidden beneath the Stalker's spiny fur are rows of high explosive smart rounds known as Rocket Rounds. Even upon close inspection, these rounds are difficult to detect. They just feel like marble-sized bumps on the surface of the skin. When launched, they burst straight out of the skin at a perpendicular angle and then change their flight path to track targets marked with a Shrieker. Normally, Rocket Rounds can be fired directly at targets, but the lay-out of the launchers makes it nearly impossible for the Stalker to properly aim its attack without a Shrieker round to follow. These rounds are basically miniaturized Organic Rockets that track their target by sound instead of by sight. They are not as complex or as intelligent as full-sized Organic Rockets. They can alter their flight path up to sixty degrees and can make multiple corrections if necessary, but they cannot double back around to try and strike a target they originally missed nor can they weave around obstacles in their way. These rounds are blind, so they are not aware of any obstacles between them and their target. Rocket Rounds will choose the most direct path towards their target, but they will quickly change their trajectory to home-in on moving targets. The rounds can also track the signals from Squealers and Shrieker rounds launched from other Bio-Tech devices.

Primary Purpose: Assault.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Range: 4,000 feet (1,219 m).

Mega-Damage: 5D6 M.D. for each Rocket Round.

Rate of Fire: Volleys of 1, 2, 4, 8, or 16.

Bonuses: +5 to strike when tracking a tagged target, otherwise they are -4 to strike. In addition, tagged targets are -3 to dodge against these homing rounds.

Payload: 200 Rocket Rounds. It takes 1D4 hours to regrow each spent Rocket Round.

3. Poisonous Spine Launchers: Concealed beneath the skin on the shoulders of the War Mount are clusters of poisonous spine launchers. Each spine sits in its own individual launcher tube, but multiple launchers are grouped together so that the Stalker does not need to adjust its aim on subsequent shots. A powerful muscle contraction propels the spines through tiny openings in the skin. They are completely silent when fired, which is why few people even know this weapon system exists. Each spine can only deliver one kind of Bio-Toxin, but Stalkers are equipped with five different types of Bio-Toxin (4 spines equipped with each type, for a total of 20 spines). The War Mount or Outrider can select exactly which type of Bio-Toxin is fired, and multiple toxins can be used against the same target (all damage and penalties are cumulative).

Primary Purpose: Anti-Splicer.

Secondary Purpose: Defense.

Range: 800 feet (244 m).

Mega-Damage: 1D4 points of M.D. or S.D.C. (depending on the nature of the target), plus the additional effects of the Bio-Toxin:

Tech Paralyzer: This toxin is used to paralyze M.D.C. creatures and Bio-Tech creations. Any Mega-Damage creature exposed to the chemical must make a roll to save vs non-lethal poison of 16 or higher or else be completely paralyzed for 2D6 melee rounds. Bio-Tech weapons and devices are also paralyzed and will not function. Suits of Host Armor can be paralyzed, but the spray does not affect the pilot inside. He can strip off his suit to escape the paralysis although he will likely be trapped in the comatose Host Armor. The chemical has no effect on normal humans and other S.D.C. creatures.

Signal Mixer: This unusual toxin interferes with the neurological connection formed between any Bio-Tech device and the wielder. Whether the chemical is applied to the organic equipment or the user, the effect is the same. Host Armor and Wing Packs become sluggish and unresponsive (-5 on initiative, -3 to strike, parry, and dodge), Bio-Weapons are unable to fire, and War Mounts do not respond to their riders (attacks per melee and bonuses are no longer combined), plus it negates all bonuses from any sensory enhancements. Any person or device exposed to the chemical must make a roll to save vs non-lethal poison of 16 or higher. A failed roll means the target is affected for 3D4 melee rounds. Stalkers like to use this chemical when they take down prey in front of witnesses. Instead of any obvious damage or impairment, it just looks like the victim screwed up in battle and was overwhelmed by the Stalker's superior combat skills.

Agony: Anyone exposed to the chemical must make a save vs non-lethal poison of 16 or higher or else be overwhelmed with mind-numbing pain. Victims of the Agony toxin lose two attacks per melee and are -3 to strike, parry, and dodge for 3D4 melee rounds. The poison works on humans, supernatural creatures, and War Mounts. It also works on Host Armor in a sense. The armor itself does not suffer from the pain inflicted by this toxin, but it does pass the sensation on to the pilot. Inanimate Bio-Tech devices like Bio-Weapons and Living Armor are not affected.

Neutralizer: This toxin can instantly disable one of the greatest strengths of Bio-Technology; its ability to quickly heal itself. Any Bio-Tech device or living creature exposed to the chemical must make a save vs. non-lethal poison of 16 or higher. On a failed roll, the target's natural regenerative powers are disabled for 1D4 hours. This toxin is especially useful against Scarecrows. The poison also affects S.D.C. creatures, but most of these beings have such a slow healing rate that this is usually a waste of time. However, it is quite useful against Gene Thieves.

Rate of Fire: Can only be fired one at a time. Each shot counts as one attack per melee.

Bonuses: +2 to strike.

Payload: 4 Poisonous spines of each type (20 total). Spent spines automatically regenerate after 24 hours.

4. Poisonous Saber Teeth: Much like the clouded leopard that it was modeled after, the Stalker has a pair of large saber teeth backed by powerful jaw muscles that drastically increases the damage and power of its bite attacks. In addition, these fangs have a thin tube running through the center that enables the Stalker to inject its prey with Bio-Toxin. The Outrider can equip the Stalker with one Bio-Toxin from the list above, but once it has been selected, it cannot be changed.

Primary Purpose: Anti-Splicer.

Secondary Purpose: Assault.

Range: Melee combat/bite attack.

Mega-Damage: 3D8 M.D. is added to the normal bite damage (6D8 M.D. total) plus the additional effects of the Bio-Toxin.

Payload: 10 doses of Bio-Toxin. One dose regenerates every 6D6 minutes.

New NPCs, Notes & Quick Stats



G.M.'s Note: Martin MacAlister the Puppet Master: Martin, along with the Puppet Master O.C.C. and abilities plus the Symbiote Armor will be detailed fully in future Splicers source material. G.M.s conducting Martin should be guarded, friendly and somewhat open with the player characters. He fully realizes the gravity of the situation and is willing to assist where he can. But keep in mind, his ultimate loyalty will be to the Great House and its secrets. Martin will stay adorned in his Symbiote Armor during the player's visit and he should be fully away of any scams, cons, or actions the PCs may attempt. For purposes of the story, he should be able to neutralize and negate them fairly quickly.

Race: Puppet Master.

Alignment: Classified.

Experience Level: Classified.

Height: 6 feet, 6 inches (2 m).

Weight: 172 pounds (78 kg).

Age: Classified **Sex:** Male.



Isaac Mendoza

7th level Biotic

Before becoming Head of Security, Isaac Mendoza was an upstanding soldier with multiple decorations for heroics. Accepted into an elite Special Operations unit, Mendoza continued to distinguish himself. Surprisingly stable for a Biotic, Mendoza was repeatedly promoted, achieving a level of prominence many would have considered impossible. In an unprecedented move, the Biotic was named Head of Security, a decision that prompted a fair amount of criticism. Biotics often display a range of mental instabilities; critics feared any number of these could compromise Mendoza's position. While the majority of the senate Dreadguards expressed concern over a Biotic placed in such a highly sensitive position, Mendoza's performance has silenced even his harshest critics.

A career soldier and highly trained special operative, Mendoza is a dyed in the wool patriot and takes his position seriously. Though rarely participating in open combat anymore, Mendoza still sees himself as still fighting for his people. The Biotic is smart, well trained, and extremely resourceful. Very little escapes his sharp eyed notice and Mendoza has halted many threats before they could even begin. Intimidating and no nonsense to strangers, Mendoza is only slightly less so with members of Great House Artemis. Mendoza is unusually stable and has shown little signs of the mental instabilities that plague many Biotics. His only peculiarity is his obsession with the security of the research station; a trait his supporters argue makes him that much better for his position. However, the obsession may become dangerous.

Unknown to nearly everyone, Mendoza has begun hearing voices and even what he thinks are Machine "whispers" in his mind. The whispers warn him of threats and betrayal, from both in and out of the Great House. As part of his position, outsiders are immediately regarded with a level of suspicion and paranoia. Mendoza is extremely valuable to the House and efforts are underway to try and get rid of the voices. However, until they can be silenced, the battle is becoming near constant. Martin is the only person who suspects what is happening to the Biotic; the Puppet Master's abilities are invaluable in quieting the mental noise. The Biotic isn't completely lost to his delusions, yet they are taking a toll. For the first time in his career, he's beginning to second guess himself, some of his decisions and scrutiny over others. The real tragedy is Mendoza is a good man and a loyal defender of humanity.

G.M.'s Note: What's detailed below is only what the characters should be able to guess or infer themselves about Mendoza and his abilities. Mendoza is the Head of Security for a top secret installation with untold resources at his disposal. GM's, feel free to modify or even add to the enhancements below if needed.

Race: Biotic.

Attributes: I.Q. 13, M.E. 7, M.A. 21, P.S. 30, P.P. 19, P.E. 26, P.B. 12, Spd 25. **Note:** Both P.S. and P.E. are Splicer P.S.

Alignment: Largely Scrupulous, but his delusions are starting to affect his judgment. If left unchecked, he may eventually become Aberrant.
M.D.C.: 321, without armor. Mendoza bio-regenerates 2D6+3 M.D.C. per melee round and can regenerate lost body parts, including limbs. Mendoza can last ten times longer than normal during strenuous exercise/activity before feeling the effects of exhaustion. This means he remains alert and can operate at full efficiency for three entire days (72 hours) without sleep.

Experience Level: 7th level Biotic.

Appearance: As a Biotic, Mendoza has been completely transformed and enhanced. Standing nearly 7 feet (2.1 m) tall, he's lined with corded muscle. Though heavily muscled, Mendoza's somewhat lean and lithe, like a world class gymnast. His features are fairly feline, including unusual eyes, vaguely pointed ears, and retractable claws. Though lightly furred, what skin is visible is highlighted with unusual coloration and markings.

Height: 6 feet, 10 inches (2.1 m).

Weight: 380 pounds (171 kg).

Age: 33. **Sex:** Male.

Insanities: Mendoza is on his way to being a classic paranoid schizophrenic: imaginary voices and even Machine whispers may start guiding his actions. Like many Biotics, Mendoza also views himself as a bit of a super hero, quick to take action and crazy risks to protect powerless humans. If pressed into combat, Mendoza is extremely ruthless and has no remorse or hesitation at killing the enemy.

Skills of Note: First Aid 95%, Bio-Comms 80%, Appraise Goods 75%, Brewing 70%/80%, Cook 70%, Interrogation, Surveillance and Detect Ambush 65%, Detect Concealment, Disguise, Find Contraband, Prowl, and Tracking 60%, Forced March, Running, Resist Torture.

Weapon Proficiencies: Bio-Weapons Light, Bio-Weapons Heavy, Archery, Knife, Sword, Paired Weapons.

Combat Training: Hand to Hand Expert.

Attacks per Melee: 6

Combat Bonuses: +5 to strike, +5 to parry, +6 to dodge, +5 to pull punch, +2 to roll with punch, +2 to disarm, +8 to save vs toxins/poisons/drugs, +32% to save vs coma/death, +2 to save vs Horror Factor, Critical Strike on unmodified 18, 19, or 20, 65% Trust/Intimidate.

Known Bio-Enhancements & Features: Super Regeneration, Advanced Senses (hearing, smell, sight), Nightvision, Acid Blood, Reinforced Exoskeleton, Retractable Acid Edged Claws (+2D6 M.D. to punch, acid inflicts an additional 2D8 M.D. per melee round for one minute), Chameleon Skin.

Living Armor: Mendoza normally doesn't wear armor in the research facility, but if needed, his personal armor is Heavy Chitinous Armor styled to resemble an almost insect-like samurai.

Notable Equipment: Heavy Bore Cannon, Dual Acid-Edge Swords, EMP Side Kick (Prototype), Light Cell Laser Pistol, 1D4 Migs and modified conventional explosive charges (some hidden).

Acceptance

"Mr. Becton! You're being offered full citizenship in the Coalition States. Full citizenship! And... and an apartment on Level Twelve of Chi-Town... and..."

I shift on the hard plastic seat of my hospital chair as the pasty-faced young officer stammers on. I understand why he's here – I am a hero of the Coalition, after all. The higher-ups want to make sure I'm taken care of. But all I want right now is to get out of this hospital and back out to the 'Burbs. Back to Angela and a life that I've only just started living.

I look at the young officer as he stares at me in disbelief. I can't stop myself from thinking about how different this interview is from the one I had with him just two weeks ago...

A Rifts® Story

By S. E. Gibbons

"Mr. Eugene Becton, your application for CS citizenship and residence inside the City of Chi-Town has been denied."

The words kept ringing through my head as I staggered out of the Citizenry Board onto the busy afternoon sidewalks of downtown Josephton. The cruelness of it all crashed down on me again and again. I wandered away, through streets drowned in the shadow of the giant fortress city that had just rejected me. I didn't know where I was going, didn't see the hovercar traffic or the groups of Friday night revelers as they formed around me, celebrating another week of mind-numbing labor completed. All I could see, like a toppled wall of glass, was the culmination of a lifetime of effort lying shattered in a million pieces on the ground in

front of me. Beyond that there was nothing, only darkness that filled the endless void of the rest of my life. The dream that had been instilled in me by my parents, the one thing that had given my life purpose and meaning, was gone.

I don't know how long I walked. Hours, probably. When I finally looked up I was standing on the sidewalk in front of McCoy's Pub. For years I'd passed the place twice daily on my way to and from the manufacturing plant where I work, but I'd never set foot in it before. Don't get me wrong, I have nothing against alcohol or bars in particular; it's just that a good, upstanding Coalition citizen doesn't get drunk in public, and I'd so wanted to be a citizen. But as dusk gathered the light out of the evening sky, I wasn't thinking about where I was going or caring what I did. I just knew I had to do something to forget my pointless excuse of a life before I went completely out of my mind.

Warm air and noise rolled over me as I opened the door, a welcome invitation after the cold of the late October evening and my own lonely solitude. The place was crowded as I trudged inside. Subdued lighting came from a double row of red neon lights running around the room up where the walls met the ceiling. A few side lights brightened up the bar area, but not by much. The dim atmosphere suited me just fine. I wanted to melt into obscurity, and bright lights would only have been an unwelcome intrusion on my misery.

As I made my way through the milling crowd toward the bar I could see an antique jukebox, blaring Golden Age rock music, sitting on a small stage in a back corner of the room. Dark wooden tables surrounded by men and women filled most of the floor space. The mishmash of music and conversation was loud and people were pressed close together to hear each other.

Wedging myself between two groups of blithely shouting workmen, I claimed a vacant seat at the bar. A frizzy-haired, blond bartender in a white, button-down-the-front shirt dodged around two co-workers who were busy pouring some kind of beer into the eagerly thrust out mugs of the group to my right and stopped in front of me. Her eyes sparkled as she smiled. "What can I get you, love?" she asked without having to seem to shout over the noise.

I was taken aback by the question, though looking back on it now I know I shouldn't have been. Like I said, I'm not a big drinker. Up to this point in my life, my sole experience with alcohol had been when I was eight years old. Timmy Johnson and I had snuck a beer out of his dad's supply beneath the kitchen sink and drank it in the alley behind my house. The wooziness and slight ringing in our ears the beer engendered hadn't been worth the whipping my father administered when he caught us with the empty bottle.

Looking at the bartender, all I could think to say was, "Give me something that'll make me forget my miserable life."

A look of surprised hurt came over the bartender's face as her eyes searched mine; then she nodded her head in sympathy. "Coming right up," she said, reaching under the counter to produce a very small glass and a bottle containing some kind of brown fluid. With a flourish, she tipped the bottle over and poured the fluid through the metal straw that protruded from the bottle's silver cap, somehow keeping from dripping any of it onto the bar when another bartender accidentally bumped into her. "Drink that right quick," she instructed me.

With grim fatalism I followed her instructions, swallowing the liquid almost before it hit my tongue. The next moment, I was doubled over the bar, wheezing and coughing, trying to get my breath back as liquid fire ran down between my lungs and made an abrupt invasion of my stomach. A jovial drunk on my left started slapping me hard on the back, something I didn't really appreciate, but I was powerless to stop him. Eyes watering, I slowly straightened back onto my stool. Already the fire in my belly was starting to mellow, spreading a relaxing warmth outward as my system got used to the new addition.

The frizzy-haired bartender had snatched the bottle out of the way as I'd doubled over. She stood, bottle in hand, with a look of compassion on her face. There was something familiar about her. I brushed the feeling away with a reminder of the cruel joke my life had become. I gestured for her to pour me another drink, as I couldn't yet get my voice work-

ing. She hesitated, then with a resigned shrug, poured another glass and set the bottle next to it. Wiping her hands on the black apron around her waist she took a step back, then turned and hurried toward the customers at the other end of the bar. Alone with my bottle, I drank the second glass of the awful liquid, content in the knowledge that it would either help me forget my rotten life or kill me – possibly both, which was just fine with me. The fire wasn't so bad this time, though it still made me cough. The drunk next to me gave me an encouraging blow to the back, grinning and nodding. I frowned at him, grabbed the bottle and poured myself another drink.

The noise in the place quieted the closer I got to the bottom of the bottle, though I'm not sure if that's because things really did get quieter or just that the alcohol was affecting my sense of hearing. After an hour or so, I got up and staggered away from the bar: I think I had to use the restroom, though I don't remember if I ever did or not. I do remember coming back to the bar to find that my stool had been taken by a brawny man dressed in a filthy coverall. I was mightily offended by that. I'd lost my dream of being a Coalition citizen, and now I'd lost my seat at the bar. Anger exploded in me as I considered saying something that probably would have started my first ever bar fight. At that moment, an arm wrapped around my shoulders and drew me away, however.

At first, I wasn't sure whose arm it was that was guiding me. I was too busy looking at the ground and trying not to fall over to really care. The arm was strong and seemed to convey a sense of understanding about how I felt, and that was good. The burning anger that had flared up in me at how unfair the world was settled back into a low smolder as I was led through the crowd toward a table in a dark corner.

Three men drinking beer from long-neck bottles were sitting at the table my unseen guide had steered me to. I sat down in an empty chair and looked around at my new drinking companions. Even in my inebriated state, I noticed that the table's occupants were unique – they were the only people in the place who weren't shouting at each other in conversation. A motion to my right made me turn and I finally saw the person who'd guided me to this quiet spot. He was a somber man of middle years who looked as angry as anyone I'd ever seen. Half rising from the chair he'd just settled in, he raised his hand pointing a finger toward the ceiling, then circling it in a quick motion before he sank back down again. One of the men at the table who'd evidently been holding my guide's bottle for him slid it across the table. He caught it and took a long drink without saying a word.

The fog that had draped across my mind in a comforting blanket of forgetfulness began to lift just a little as I took stock of my other table mates. The dim light didn't allow me to see much of the three of them, beyond the fact that each seemed to have eyes that mirrored the anger of the man who sat next to me. Each seemed to brood over his bottle lost in his own thoughts. "Looks like I'm at the angry-man table," I thought to myself with a mental snort of amusement, "just the place for me, except for the fact that I don't have a beer." That problem was solved a minute later when the frizzy-haired bartender came through the crowd carrying a tray with four beer bottles on it. She stopped with a nonplussed look on her face when she saw that I had joined the four people at the table. My companion motioned her over and told her to just leave the four beers since he hadn't finished his. The frizzy-haired woman nodded, pocketed the coins he handed her, then distributed the beers around the table without speaking. As she handed me my bottle she looked me straight in the eyes. Even in the bad light, I saw that she had the most beautiful green eyes. Then she straightened and was gone, melting back through the crowd.

I turned toward my companion and offered to pay him the credits I owed him for the beer, but he waved away my comments and took another long pull from his bottle without looking at me. No one else at the table was saying anything, so I took a swig of my beer. It didn't taste any better than the one I remembered from my youth, but I was starting to remember what I'd come in to forget, so I kept drinking.

When my bottle was half empty, the silence at the table was interrupted by the man who'd brought me there. I couldn't make out what he was saying over the noise of the crowd, but the vehemence in his voice was



unmistakable. His companions, who could obviously hear better than I, were nodding their heads in agreement. Then the one directly across the table from me started to speak. His deep voice carried through the noise like dark waves on a pond surrounded by windblown trees.

"Yeah, the damn CS thinks they own everything and everybody. They sit up in their safe little city like they're some kind of gods looking down on us. We're like rats to them, messing up their home."

"Nah, we ain't rats to 'em," the one on my left joined in. "Rats ain't got no uses. We're more like horses an' pigs an' such. We work hard for 'em then they go into their nice, warm houses, slams the door an' leaves us out to suffer in the cold."

Heads nodded around the table again, and I found myself nodding along with them. This wasn't the first time I'd heard complaints like these, but tonight it struck a chord deep within me.

"To them we are animals," my guide observed, loud enough this time for me to hear. "Useful animals, ones who'll work hard, but not people; not beings that deserve respect. Just animals they don't care about and owe nothing to." He took a sip of his beer and stared into the distance for a moment before speaking again.

"The Coalition reminds me of a shepherd I saw one summer when I was a kid. He was sitting under a tree drinking while his three dogs were out in this field rounding up a flock of sheep. Those dogs were running around like nuts trying to get all those sheep to go through a gate into this pen on one side of the field and that shepherd was just sitting there, watching them work. When the dogs finally got all the sheep in the pen, he just sauntered over and closed the gate with this big look of satisfaction on his face, like he'd done something wonderful. Meanwhile, his dogs were laying there, panting in the heat. The shepherd didn't even look at them. He just walked off, calling the dogs to follow. Two of the dogs got up, but one couldn't. It was trying, but the heat must have been too much for it. It lay there yelping and crying and trying to get up, watching the shepherd walk away."

He took a sip of beer and continued.

"When the shepherd realized one of his dogs wasn't following him, he turned around and yelled at it. It was trying to get up, but again and again it just fell over. The shepherd saw that and walked back to it and I thought he was going to pick it up. But no, he hauled off and kicked that poor dog in the head!"

A groan of outrage and disgust ripped out of me at that. My table mates made similar noises. My new friend nodded and continued.

"Yeah, I couldn't believe it either. The dog, well it just lay there and whimpered in pain. The guy started laughing and kicking it over and over again, calling it worthless and useless and stuff like that. After a few minutes I guess he finally got tired. I saw him spit on it and then just walk away, laughing about what he'd done."

He took one last drink from his bottle then slammed it down on the table. I could see his hand flexing around the base like he was trying to strangle someone. I felt the same way. If I could have gotten my hands around that shepherd's neck right then...

"What happened to the dog?" the man across from me asked.

"I ran out to it when the shepherd was gone. It was still breathing and kind of whining a little, but I could see it was in a bad way. One of its legs was broken, and its tail wasn't moving at all. I knelt down beside it and stroked its fur, and it looked up at me." My companion sat staring through the table, his voice a terrible monotone. "I swear it looked me right in the eye, and I could hear it thinking, 'Why'd he do that?' Like I would know the answer. Then it laid its head back down and died right there in front of me."

In my mind I saw myself standing over that steadfast and loyal dog as it died, never understanding why it had been so cruelly treated. It had given so much of itself, only to be destroyed by the one person who should have loved it most of all. Tears of grief and impotent rage began coursing down my cheeks. My reverie was broken when my companion spoke again.

"I never thought I'd see cruelty like that again until I came to the 'Burbs. The Coalition treats people here just like that shepherd. Uses them up then throws them away like they're worth nothing. Every time

I see some innocent person being beaten down by the Coalition, I see that dog again. They think that just because someone doesn't live in their fortress city, they have no value. That they're better than us just because of who they are."

His words were like a knife peeling the flesh from my bones. All of the pain of the rejection I had received that afternoon flooded over me again like an avalanche of burning cold snow. The Coalition had ripped open my heart then poured salt all over it for good measure.

"Yeah, I know whatcha mean," the man across the table from me said. "I had a cousin one time who tried to get into Chi-Town. He did the whole paperwork route and everything, kept his nose clean and helped out any way he could, you know? He waited years for his chance to come up. I was there the day that he came home from the review. Man, you shoulda seen his face when he came through the door. Just went straight to the kitchen and started drinking. When he finally loosened up enough to talk he said the officer who rejected him actually laughed about it. Told my cousin to go back to the garbage heap he'd crawled out of 'cause that was all he was to them, just human trash like all the rest of the 'Burbees." He took a drink as infuriated growls went around the table. "Yeah, my cousin took it hard. We tried to make him feel better, but that didn't stop him from putting a bullet through his head later that night."

It wasn't the first time I'd heard of someone committing suicide after their application for admittance into Chi-Town was rejected. The image of a young man sitting all alone with a gun in his hand, contemplating suicide, lodged in my mind. A feeling of overwhelming sympathy welled up in me. Then the image in my mind changed. I could see the anonymous Coalition official who'd rejected the young man laughing at him from behind his desk. In my mind's eye, the official wasn't faceless, though: he was the same pasty-faced bureaucrat that had rejected me earlier that afternoon. The anger that had been smoldering in me ignited into fury against the Coalition States and all they stood for.

"I wonder what ever happened to that shepherd guy?" the man seated on the far side of my companion said. His hands were clenching and unclenching before him on the table. The sleeves of his shirt had ridden up a few inches on his forearms as he flexed. I noticed for the first time the wrist-cuffs with plastic tubes trailing out of them going up under the sleeves. The realization that the man was a Juicer seemed to float through my brain without really registering.

"Prob'ly off somewhere having hisself a fine ole night kickin' more dogs," the man on my left said with a snort.

"Nah," the one across from me said in his deep voice. "I bet that the next time he tried something like that, his other dogs saw the writing on the wall. I bet they jumped up and ripped his throat out."

"No, they wouldn't have done that," my companion said. "Dogs aren't smart enough for something like that. They can't think about the future and see the way things are going like people can. They don't get tired of being treated like garbage and fight back like we can."

The Juicer beside my companion snorted. "Yeah right, fight back? Against the CS? What are we going to do, punch some soldier in the jaw if he walks in here tonight?" He drank from his bottle, wiped his mouth. "Face it, there's no way to fight the Coalition."

I nodded in agreement with the others around the table, but my new friend sat back with a thoughtful look on his face.

"You know, everybody's got a weak spot, some vital place where they think they're safe but they aren't. If we could hit the Coalition where they didn't expect it, we could shake them up, teach them a lesson. If we hit them where it hurts, it could wake them up to how people really feel. But it would have to be someplace big, like that big manufacturing complex down the road from here. They make all sorts of military vehicles for the army there. I bet if we could get in there, we could find a weakness that would put a big hurt on the CS, let them know the dogs they kick around out here in the 'Burbs can bite back."

The three other men at the table suddenly looked uncomfortable, their gaze shifting rapidly from my companion's face to mine then looking around at the crowd and back again. The mood at the table had changed, become darker and less friendly.

My heart beat faster as the dangerous words my companion had spoken fueled the anger that was in me. Images of the injustices I had witnessed all my life ran through my mind: corrupt Dead Boys extorting money from people they should have been protecting, homes that had been destroyed because of the suspicion that they sheltered wrongdoers, people killed just for having been in the wrong place when a soldier felt angry. Bitterness and hatred for the Coalition festered inside of me. Beside me, my companion sat in his chair, lost in thought.

The others at the table grew visibly tenser as a minute passed in silence, then another. My companion set down his beer and sat up in his chair, putting his hands against the table as if making ready to leave.

"I can help you with that," I whispered, surprised by the sound of my own voice. The rage that had been growing in me all evening had found its way to my mouth without conscious decision.

My companion stopped. He turned sideways in his chair and looked at me like he wasn't quite sure he'd heard me right.

"I can help you," I said again, turning to face him. "I can help you teach the Coalition a lesson they won't forget."

My companion sat motionless beside me, his eyes lost in the shadows cast by the red neon lights. I stared back at him as the fury at how the CS had treated me and so many others burned within me. "Let me help you," I pleaded in a calm voice that betrayed none of the inferno raging in me.

"What could you do for us?" my friend asked in a quiet voice that nevertheless carried through the noise of the crowd around us.

"I work in that factory," I said. "I can go anywhere in it without being challenged. I could get you inside without anyone noticing."

"How?" he said.

"I'm allowed to go all over the plant, into any section, because of the work I do with the vehicle power systems. Whenever we get visitors from the Coalition, they always put them with me because I can show them everything without having to get temporary security passes. I could get you anywhere inside the plant."

"You're willing to do that for us?"

"Yes," I replied.

For a moment, a spark showed in the shadows concealing my companion's eyes.

"Very good," he said, and his grin reminded me of a wolf looking down on its prey. "We will teach the Coalition States a lesson that they will never forget."

* * *

Looking back on it now, it seems almost childish how easily I was manipulated. All I can say is at the time I wasn't thinking straight, wasn't anywhere close to being sober, and had no idea what I was getting myself into. I also found out later that my supposed new friend was a Mind-Melter, which would probably explain some of what was going on in my head that night. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I don't remember how long we sat around the table after that. Despite my eagerness to proceed, my new friends insisted that we should wait to start planning until we could be more alone. Instead, we swapped stories and drank more beer and I found myself part of a group for the first time in my life.

At some point that evening, I laid my head down on my arms and drifted off to sleep. I was awakened by the sensation of someone standing beside me, gently shaking my shoulder. I raised my head a little to see that the barroom was empty. The bartenders were putting chairs up on all the tables. Feeling the hand still on my shoulder, I looked up further and saw the frizzy-haired, blond bartender bending over me with a sweet, sympathetic smile on her face. I smiled back at her, then turned and heaved the entire contents of my stomach onto the floor in front of her feet. She jumped back pretty quick, so I don't think any of the vomit got on her shoes, but I'm not certain. At that moment, all my concentration was focused on making sure that my stomach completed its evolution from full to empty. When my dry heaves finally let up, I shakily tried to sit upright, but the world unexpectedly began to spin around me. Then the tabletop jumped up at me and everything went dark.

When I came to again I was outside, staggering down the street opposite to my apartment building, headed in the general direction of the front entrance. It took me several moments to grasp that this was my destination. It took several more moments to realize that I wasn't making this journey alone. Staggering right along beside me was the frizzy-haired bartender whom I had spoken with earlier in the evening. As we stumbled across the street toward the entry, I became conscious of the fact that my arm was around her shoulders as she guided our course. That realization made me feel very good for some reason.

When we reached the doorway to my apartment building I used my free hand to start searching for my card-key to open the lock, but she was way ahead of me. She slipped the white plastic card through the reader, the indicator light changed from red to green, and I heard the sharp clack-buzz of the bolt being electrically opened. As gallantly as my condition allowed, I leaned against the glass door, opening it and motioning for her to enter before me. A small smile played across her lips as she stepped through. "My lady," I said, proud of how I slurred the words only slightly as she passed. I bowed to her as she walked by, and she had to catch me before I became intimately familiar with the cheap green carpeting of the building lobby. Laughing, she hauled me upright, swung my arm up and ducked under it again. Then, holding that hand with one of her own, she slipped her other arm around my waist to support me. As we staggered across the lobby toward the sets of elevator doors, a light scent of peaches seemed to emanate from her.

My companion took the lead again as she led me stumbling out of the elevator onto my floor of the building. The hallway was bright and empty, which made the trip easier. Reaching my door, she eased me up against the doorframe then slowly disengaged herself from under my arm. With her sweet smile still playing on her lips, she walked back up the hallway looking back at me over her shoulder. Three doors down and across the hall from my apartment, she stopped and pulled out what I thought was my card key. Sliding it through the reader above the door-knob, she turned the handle and pushed open the door. With a little nod and one last smile, she softly said "Goodnight," and went through the doorway. I heard the latch catch as the door closed, only then realizing the reason why the frizzy-haired bartender had looked so familiar to me earlier at the bar. She was my neighbor!

With that startling revelation turning over and over in my mind, I turned to my own doorway. With just a little fumbling, I was able to extract my own card key from my pants pocket. After several tries, it finally found its way into the slot and the lock clicked open. I stumbled into the darkened apartment that I reluctantly called home, still thinking of the extraordinary revelation of who my neighbor was. I fumbled my way into my bedroom and collapsed on my bed. The last thought I remember having before the soft caress of my pillow wafted me to sleep was that I needed to find out her name.

My return to consciousness the next morning was gradual. I remember lying in bed for quite a while, eyes closed, knowing that I should be feeling terrible about something, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what. Finally, I gave up and opened my eyes.

I became fully awake immediately. Brilliantly hot rays of light stabbing directly into my brain have that effect on me.

Crying out in pain, I slapped my hands over my eyes and rolled away from the light, which was an awful mistake. The motion started the room spinning in a mad vortex around me while sledge hammers of pain began beating at my brain. At that instant my stomach cramped; it felt like an angry feral cat was trying to claw its way to freedom by climbing up my throat. I fell off my bed and crawled toward the bathroom, the sledge-hammers beating an insane rhythm against the insides of my skull every foot of the way. I barely made it to the toilet before the cat won its struggle. The vilest concoction I'd ever had the misfortune of experiencing exploded out of me. The smell brought more gut-bruising heaves, creating a self-perpetuating cycle that seemed to go on for half of eternity.

In the end, wrung out as thoroughly as a wet dishrag, I slumped to the floor of the bathroom and rested my pounding head against the cool, porcelain base of the toilet.

I'm not sure how long the person at the door had been knocking before I recognized the sound echoing through my apartment. With some difficulty, I clawed my way up off the floor and reached for a towel to wipe some of the taste from my mouth. I would much rather have stayed there wishing for oblivion, but the only other time anyone had ever knocked on my door was two years ago when the building superintendent announced that a Coalition patrol had decided to have everyone removed so they could search for a magic user who was on the loose. Apparently, a Dog Boy in one of the Coalition's rare patrols in this part of Josephpton had gotten a sniff of magic being used inside our building, and the commander of the patrol wanted to check it out. Nothing had come of it except for three hours spent outside in the middle of a cold and snowy night shivering as each of us was questioned and our building turned inside out. I'd heard a rumor a few weeks later that someone very high in the chain of command had sent both the commander of the patrol and the Dog Boy who'd given the false alarm to the Tolkeen front shortly thereafter.

I stumbled out of the bathroom and lurched my way to the front door, hoping that they'd give me enough time to put my jacket on before sending me outside. I was startled when I opened the door to find the woman from the bar standing there. She was wearing green corduroy pants, a white blouse and a smile like the rising of the sun. Before I could say anything, she looked me over and extended both of her hands toward me, one holding a glass of orange juice and the other holding something palm down in a loose fist. "I figured after last night you could probably use these," she said with a sympathetic smile and a slight shrug of her shoulder.

Surprised enough at her presence that I couldn't think of anything to say, I reached forward carefully while leaning my shoulder against the doorframe. Into my right hand she deposited two small blue pills which I recognized as illegal black market painkillers. Normally, I don't go anywhere near black market stuff, but the way I was feeling that morning I would have gladly taken a cyanide pill if she'd offered it to me.

Closing my eyes to ward off the painfully bright light in the hallway, I threw the pills into my mouth and took the proffered glass of orange juice. I'm not sure if it was the change in the taste of my mouth or if the painkillers had already started working on me, but by the time I lowered the glass of juice I was already starting to feel better. I opened my eyes to see that my benefactor was no longer standing before me. Startled, I leaned out into the hallway to see her almost back at her apartment door. "H-hey, wait... uh..." I called out, embarrassed that I didn't know her name. She'd reached her door, which she had left ajar, but stopped and looked back at me.

"I have to go to work," she said with a cheerful toss of her head, "but I'm off tomorrow. If you want, you can bring the glass by tomorrow evening. I'll make dinner."

"Yeah, uh, sure..." I said. My brain, still foggy with the receding pain, was struggling to catch up with the situation.

"Great! See you then," she said and bounded into her apartment with a little wave.

"Yeah, great," I mumbled as her door closed. Belatedly, my brain finally kicked into gear, reminding me that I'd seen her before a few times here in the building, usually passing in the hallway, though I had held the elevator door for her once a few months ago. We'd spoken a bit on the ride down, but I hadn't remembered it because I hadn't been looking to form attachments to any of my neighbors, even a pretty one. I was just being polite.

Now she'd asked me to dinner. I stood in my apartment doorway staring at her closed door just down the hallway from mine for a couple of minutes trying to make sense of what was going on. Finally, shaking my head just a bit, I retreated into my apartment. I was amazed how much better I was feeling, with only a slight ache behind my left eye to remind me of the pain I'd just been in. I really needed to thank my neighbor for those pills! Standing in my living room lost in thought for a few moments, I realized that I was still holding the empty orange juice glass. *Well, at least I can wash it before taking it back to her,* I thought, turning toward my kitchen.

I had just turned on the tap when I heard another knock at my door. I turned off the water and carried the glass to the door, thinking that she'd changed her mind and come to call off dinner. Opening the door I was propelled backward as someone shoved both me and the door aside and came striding into my apartment. Caught off balance, I stumbled back two steps, stopping against the door to my hall closet and not getting a good look at the man who'd rushed past me. A second, taller intruder charged in on the heels of the first, then turned and quickly shut the door. The first man moved with Juicer-like grace to the window in my living room. Standing to one side of it, he moved the shade a few inches to inspect the street below.

Looking back and forth between the two of them, I didn't know what to do. Both men wore overcoats that extended almost to their feet; the one by the window was in brown while the one by the front door was in a deep maroon color. The tall man was leaning his ear against the door, listening for any sound from the hallway. His dark goatee and black sunglasses stood out against the chalk-white pallor of his skin. A worn, blue baseball cap with some kind of sports symbol stitched in faded silver on the front of it covered his head. Dirty blond hairs emerged from under the cap as if trying to escape their captivity, covering most of his ears.

The one at the window was about half a foot shorter than me and had no hat on. His curly brown hair was cut just above his collar. The sunlight pouring through the space between the window shades and the wall illuminated the weathered face of someone who had spent a great deal of time outdoors.

"Who are you people? What are you doing here?" I blurted out.

Neither man responded to my question. The intruder by the window, satisfied with what he saw, turned and with quick, silent steps, almost ran to the kitchen area then came back and looked in my bedroom for a few moments. Reversing his course, he stopped at the bathroom entrance, crouched down and nudged the door open all the way to check out the dark interior. During this performance, the man at the door straightened, turning to watch me through his sunglasses. Even if I had been thinking about trying to escape, I knew there was no way I could get past him. I fidgeted with my hands, looking back and forth between the two of them. The smaller man finally straightened and began to casually unbutton his jacket as he walked back into the living room.

"You'll have to forgive our entrance, but we can never be too careful," he said as he surveyed the bare, gray walls. He nodded his head toward the large man at the door who nodded back, then folded his arms and bowed his head almost as if he was praying.

"Who are you?" I said a second time. My hands were slick on the smooth glass I still held. The smaller man put a finger to his lips to silence me, staring at his companion and holding perfectly still. I continued looking back and forth between the two for several minutes until the tall man finally looked up. "It's clear," he said in a deep, ominous voice. The shorter man nodded and gave me a tight smile as he took off his coat, laid it on the old couch pushed against one wall of the living room and stretched his arms and back. Behind me the man at the door also unbuttoned his coat but made no move to take it or his hat or sunglasses off.

"Who are you?" I asked for the third time, directing the question toward the first intruder since he seemed to be the one in charge.

"My name's Dennis. He's called Adger," the shorter man said with a nod toward his companion. "We were sent by the gentleman you spoke with last night at the bar. We came to check you out and make sure everything was on the level before going forward. Not that we didn't trust you," he said, spreading his hands in a mollifying gesture. "You're just not our usual type of bird, you see."

I looked at him in bewilderment but he continued on without notice.

"The Commander picked you out, so we figured you were alright. You see, he had a premonition about you; you know – a psychic vision. He knew you were the one we were looking for before he ever laid eyes on you. That's why he went out last night – he knew you'd be there, waiting for him. Even so, we have to be careful because it's always dangerous for us when we recruit a new member."

Everything hit me in an instant as I realized just what the short man standing in the middle of my living room was talking about. Images

and feelings poured through my mind – the rejection of my citizenship application, the suffocating despair that had driven me to enter the bar, the conversation around the table, my resentment and anger toward the Coalition States and the commitment that I had made to a stranger and his friends. I suddenly remembered all of it. Still leaning against the closet door, I straightened as much as I could as the small man continued to speak.

“We rarely have more than two or three of us meet together in public because of the risks we face, and the Commander almost never goes out anymore unless it’s on a mission. You should feel honored,” he said, moving toward the window again. “We almost never go to the recruit’s home, at least at first, since we don’t know who is or isn’t being watched. The Commander felt it necessary for us to come this morning, however. We need to set up secure channels of communication if you’re going to help us with this job.” He stood next to the window and moved the shade again to look out at the street.

I was about to reply to him when a new thought sent a chill up my spine. “How do I know who you are?” I asked as calmly as I could. “You two could be from Internal Security or Net-Set for all I know.”

“Good question. Shows you’re thinking,” the short man grinned at me without moving from the window. He glanced at his companion, who still stood blocking the front door. “Show him,” he said.

The tall man nodded. He reached up and slowly removed his baseball cap and sunglasses.

The empty orange juice glass slipped from my nerveless fingers, landed on my foot and rolled across the thin carpet of the entranceway. I barely noticed the pain.

The being by the door wasn’t human.

The light in my entranceway reflected sharply from the pale white plates that formed the top of the creature’s skull: they rose smoothly to form ridges and small points that ran from above his forehead to the back of his head. I could see that the dirty blond hair that had seemed to be his was actually stitched into the interior rim of the hat to give the appearance of hair. His eyes were a deep red color that no human being had ever been born with. Staring at him, I realized that he was much taller than I had first assumed. His head nearly grazed the light fixture above him. All of the propaganda I had heard all of my life about the dangers of D-Bees and monsters screamed in my mind as I stood frozen to the spot. Ice cold fear that bordered on mindless terror gripped me as the image of him lunging for my throat came unbidden to my mind. His unnatural eyes seemed to burn into me, and unconsciously I started to edge away from him. Then he did the most amazing thing. He smiled; an utterly friendly and human expression that seemed to soften his alien appearance. I found that I could breathe again. Behind me, I heard a chuckle.

“Yeah, that’s just the reaction I had the first time I saw a Dragonmage,” Dennis said as he walked up to stand beside me.

Conscious that I was staring, but unable to tear my eyes away from the strange being in front of me, I hesitantly smiled back at him. I knew about D-Bees of course, but I couldn’t think when the last time was that I had been this close to one. Most of them lived in the newer ‘Burbs and shanty towns farther away from Chi-Town where they wouldn’t draw so much attention and persecution from human supremacists. The Old-Town ‘Burbs where I lived, bastions of humanity that tried to be more pure than the Coalition itself, were reputed to be completely free of them. The man behind me had definitely taken a risk by coming here with this being walking beside him.

“How do you do?” he asked me, his voice seeming to rise up from the depths of his chest.

“I’m good,” I replied with only a slight tremor in my voice. “And you?”

“My day has been most excellent,” he said. I could feel the hair on my neck rise even though there was nothing in his reply the least bit threatening.

“Hey Adger,” Dennis said, laying his hand on my shoulder and throwing a quick wink my way, “ever think of getting some hair implants done so that you wouldn’t scare people so much?”

“That would just make me as ugly as you, Dennis,” the D-Bee at the door replied, grinning and showing even, white teeth.

Their friendly banter set me somewhat more at ease, though my eyes kept shifting back toward the Dragonmage to assure myself that he was not coming any closer. Then the smile slid off Dennis’s face.

“Be careful who you talk to from now on,” he said as he looked at me. “The CS has spies everywhere. Even a little slip of the tongue could land one of us in the brig or worse. Be careful. We all have to trust each other with our lives.” The good feeling I’d had a few moments ago vanished like a candle doused with a bucket of ice water.

“Take this,” Dennis said, extending a small, silver cellular phone toward me. “It has a scrambler chip in it but try to keep your calls short anyway, just for security reasons. Use speed-dial one any time you need to reach us. We’ll be calling you to set up the next meeting.” I took the phone with a frown, cradling it in both of my hands. I’d never owned a phone before and had no idea how to use it. Not many people in the ‘Burbs can afford such a luxury. Seeing the look on my face, Dennis took the phone out of my cupped hands and showed me how to answer a call by flipping it open when it vibrated and which buttons to push when I wanted to make a call.

“Just make sure that you don’t go walking down the street with it to your ear, alright?” he said as he put it back in my hands and moved toward the couch. He grabbed his coat while the D-Bee at the door put back on his disguise. “And it probably wouldn’t be a good idea to call any of your chums with that; might raise questions, you know?” I just nodded my head, too embarrassed to admit that I had no one to call even if I wanted to.

Putting his coat on, Dennis started to walk back toward me and the front door of my apartment. The D-Bee was leaning against it again, an ear pressed to the wood, trying to detect anyone who might be waiting outside for their appearance. I was suddenly afraid of what might happen when they opened the door.

“Cheer up, mate!” Dennis said as he passed by me, buttoning his overcoat. “You’re part of Hell’s Fist now, and we’ll take care of you.”

My mind reeled at his words. Hell’s Fist, the most violent and ruthless Retribution Squad that had invaded the ‘Burbs since the liberation of Tolkeen! They’d publicly vowed to bring the Coalition to ruin and slaughter every last man, woman and child who lived in Chi-Town. They’d launched raids in the ‘Burbs that had destroyed businesses, marketplaces, even whole apartment buildings, killing hundreds of people each time, most of whom were not even Coalition citizens. They struck without reason or mercy, punishing their enemies and anyone else who stood in their way, then vanished into the smoke of the carnage they’d created. They were hell-spawned demons, agents of chaos, pain and death.

My eyes felt like they would pop out of my head as I stared at the man named Dennis. “Expect to hear from us soon,” he said as his companion opened the door and slipped out into the hallway. He followed a moment later, throwing me a jaunty salute as he left.

Alone in my apartment, I felt the walls shrink in on me. I stared at the phone in my hands, the physical reminder that I was not going as mad as the world around me seemed. One thought kept racing through my mind: what had I gotten myself into?

* * *

That weekend passed with agonizing slowness. I carried the phone with me constantly as I wandered around my apartment, expectant and yet fearful of its awakening. I didn’t dare leave for fear that the phone might begin vibrating while I was in public. I tried to go about my usual routine; more and more however, I would find myself simply standing, staring at the phone in my hand, memorizing its every detail with morbid fascination. The knock on my door Sunday evening came as a shock.

I ran to the door and opened it to see the lady from down the hall standing before me. She had on a light blue blouse, matching denim jeans and sandals. Her hair had been pulled back into a ponytail which a few wisps of hair had escaped from. The smile on her face changed to a

look of concern as she saw my rumpled and unshaven state. With a start, I remembered her invitation to dinner. I also remembered her glass, sitting unwashed in my sink.

"I just came by to see if you still wanted to come for dinner," she said in obvious confusion. "It's ready now and..." A delicious smell emanated from the open door of her apartment and filled the hallway around her. I suddenly realized that I hadn't eaten anything since Friday.

"Um, yeah, I uh..." I stammered. I moved the hand that was holding the cell phone behind my back. "I was just going to get ready," I lied.

"Look, if you're not feeling well you don't have to—" she started to protest.

"No, I... I want to come," I said, realizing it was true. I wanted to get to know this woman standing before me.

"Okay, if you're sure..."

"Yes, I'm sure. Give me ten minutes, okay?" She nodded and smiled.

"Okay," she said, retreating back toward her door.

I closed my door and whirled around, my mind racing. I ran into my bathroom then stopped. Carefully, I placed the phone down on top of the toilet tank where it would be safe. Then I tore off my clothes and jumped into the shower, not waiting to see if the water might warm up, an iffy proposition any day of the week. After a quick wash and shave, I emerged, dripping and shivering but feeling much better. I quickly dressed then ran into the kitchen and frantically washed the glass, hoping that I wasn't taking too long. Drying the glass with a hand towel, I ran back into the bathroom to comb my hair. With a deep breath, I looked into the mirror. I had on my best work clothes, a brown collared shirt with two buttons on the front and matching khaki pants that I normally only wore when a bigwig from the company or the Coalition government was coming to the plant. I picked up the glass and turned to go. At the bathroom door I stopped and turned back to stare at the cell phone sitting on the white porcelain of the toilet tank. I picked it up and slipped it into my pants pocket, praying that it would remain inert for the evening. Then I rushed out of my apartment.

The smells in the hallway were heavenly as I closed my door. I'm a fairly good cook, having lived on my own for a little over twenty years, but I could already tell that my culinary skills would be far surpassed by the woman who had invited me to dinner. I stood before her door with butterflies in my stomach. I almost didn't knock, but hunger reinforced my courage. The door opened before I could get my hand down.

"Hi," she said, looking me over, a broad smile lighting her face. She backed into her apartment and motioned me forward. "Come on in."

I stepped into her apartment. The floor plan looked like it was a mirror image to that of my own, but that's where the similarities ended. The plain concrete walls of the apartment building had been painted a cheerful yellow and wall hangings and pictures hung all over them. As I entered the living room, I noticed that the bare bulbs of the light fixtures in the ceilings had been covered with glass enclosures that looked artistic to my untrained eye. The thin carpeting on the floor of the living room had largely been covered in multi-hued rugs of various sizes. Most intriguing were the plants that seemed to fill every nook and cranny. Large plants stood in red clay pots in the corners near the windows while smaller plants in plastic containers sat on shelves or hung from the ceiling. The whole effect was warm and friendly, seeming to invite those who entered to relax and enjoy their surroundings.

"Do you like it?" she asked with a wave of her hands around the apartment. I could only nod, taking it all in. She grinned at my obvious bemusement. After a few moments I remembered the glass I was carrying.

"Thank you for bringing me this and the painkiller yesterday," I said, extending the glass. She laughed, taking it from me.

"My pleasure. I've seen enough heavy drinking to know what the probable outcome is going to be the next morning." She walked into the kitchen with the glass. Looking after her, my eyes were drawn toward the dining room where a small wooden table sat laden with pots and pans. Coming back into the dining room, she waved toward the table. "Ready to eat?" she said.

Nodding my eagerness, I moved into the dining room as she sat down at the table. Taking my place across from her, I reached for the lid of a pot. "Would you mind if we prayed first?" she asked.

"No, not at all," I said. I remembered with a twinge of guilt that I hadn't prayed since my mother's funeral.

She reached forward and took my hand, bowed her head and began to pray. For the life of me I can't remember what she said during that prayer; my mind was too caught up in the fact that I was holding her hand in mine. Her hand, soft and warm, felt delicate and yet strong at the same time. It stirred confusing feelings in me. She finished her prayer and looked up at me with a little smile. Giving my hand a squeeze, she released her grip, grabbed a large pot sitting in the middle of the table and began dishing noodles out onto her plate. My heart pounding in my chest, I grabbed another pot and began spooning green beans onto mine.

The next hour was spent in the most wonderful meal I'd had in decades. Somewhat shamefacedly, I found out that her name was Angela and that she and I had been neighbors for the past five years. She loved to paint and tried to get out to the countryside beyond the edge of the 'Burbs whenever she had a chance. She also loved to garden and maintained a small, rooftop garden along with several other tenants in our building. The tavern that we'd met in the other night was owned by her family. She'd worked there since she'd turned fourteen, and she loved the variety of people she got to meet, though its patrons weren't as diverse as those in some of the other bars that her family owned in other parts of the 'Burbs. Her family had actually lived inside Chi-Town a few generations back, but one of them had done something to offend the government, and the entire family had been expelled and blacklisted as punishment. No one in her family would ever be considered for citizenship again. Oddly enough, she bore no ill will toward the Coalition for this. "It all happened years before I was born," she said around a mouthful of noodles. "Why should I let it bother me?"

"But doesn't the injustice of it make you angry?" I couldn't help but ask. "You have no chance of getting in because of something an ancestor did – that's not right."

She shook her head. "No it isn't, but what would be the point of getting angry about it? Sure, I could sit out here fuming and being bitter all day about how unfair the Coalition States are but in the end the only person I'd be hurting would be me. You can't force someone to change their ways by hating them – in the end you either end up destroying yourself or becoming exactly like the people you hate. Either way, I've got better things to do with my time."

I nodded, thinking about what she'd said.

"What about you? What's your story?" Angela asked.

So I shared how my parents had once been Coalition citizens in an outlying farm district, but had decided to try to become part of the fortified city when they found out that my mother was pregnant with me. I had been born during the time my parents had waited for their initial application to be reviewed and eventually rejected. They had reapplied as quickly as possible, but both had passed away before their application could be reassessed. Angela listened as I told her of my life growing up in the outer 'Burbs, how I'd gotten a job at the manufacturing plant after my father died thanks to my "Uncle Frank," a family friend, and how I'd survived after my mother was killed in a monster attack that destroyed our home when I was fourteen.

"So you've been on your own since you were fourteen?" she asked as we lingered over our empty plates. "You didn't have any other family you could go to?"

"My father doesn't have any living family that I know of," I replied, using my fork to move a small bit of green spice around in the remains of the noodle sauce on my plate. "My mother's family stopped speaking with her when she and my father gave up their citizenship and moved here to try to get into the city. I guess I'm lucky though. My parents never had any other kids, so I didn't have to worry about providing for anyone other than myself."

"What about your Uncle Frank?"

"Well, he did ask me to move in with his family after Mom died," I explained, "but he and his wife already had nine kids, and their house

was really small, so I chose to stay on my own. They did help me find my own place, though," I added quickly.

"Do you keep in touch with them?" she asked.

"Not really. After Mom died, I had to work a lot to make ends meet so I didn't go over to their place much. Frank and I work in separate sections of the plant now, so we hardly ever see each other anymore." I felt a pang of regret for not having kept in contact with the only people I might conceivably have called family.

"I can't imagine growing up without a family," Angela said, breaking into my thoughts. "I've always had my parents and brothers and sisters around. Not to mention grandparents, aunts, uncles and whole hordes of cousins. I've always wondered what it would be like to be an only child."

"Lonely," I replied, a bit more tersely than I had intended. I looked up at her embarrassed at my outburst, but she was staring off into the distance. After a few moments, she seemed to realize that I was watching her and looked back at me with an apologetic smile.

"Sorry, sometimes my imagination kind of grabs me and takes me out of the world for a bit. My dad always called me his little dreamer." She stood up and started stacking the empty dishes together.

I stood also and helped with the cleanup, despite her protests. The meal had been so nice that I was reluctant for it to end. We walked the dishes into her kitchen. The walls had been painted white and hooks had been driven into them from which different sized pots and pans hung. Even here, there were a few small houseplants scattered around on shelves and counters, making the room feel alive and inviting.

"So have you tried to get into Chi-Town yourself?" she asked as we stacked the dirty dishes in the dishwasher.

"I've tried," I replied. I told her about how my parents had drilled into me from an early age that I must do everything I could to get into the great fortress city. I had placed my first application the day I had reached the minimum legal age of sixteen, but it had been rejected due to my not having any real skills at that time. Because of that, I had waited several years before reapplying. I had wanted to advance in my career out at the plant so that I'd have a better chance my second time around. "I reapplied for citizenship about eight years ago, but I haven't heard anything back yet," I finished. I was ashamed of the lie, but the evening had been so pleasant to that point that I didn't want to ruin it by thinking about the rejection of my application or what it had led me into.

"There's always hope!" Angela said as she closed the door of the dishwasher and pushed the start button. "Would you like some ice-cream?"

I stayed in Angela's apartment for several hours after that. We talked about everything from the types of plants that she grew to recent developments from the aftermath of the war on Tolkeen. The more I grew to know Angela, the more enraptured I became. I finally realized how late it was when I glanced out her living room window and saw that most of the lights from Chi-town had gone dark. I reluctantly stood and walked with her to her front door.

"It was really nice to have you here tonight," Angela said as she opened the door.

"It was really nice to be here," I said, moving to stand just outside her doorway.

"Maybe we can do this again soon."

"I would like that," I said.

Looking at her standing in her doorway, my heart began pounding and my mouth was suddenly dry. Before I could think of anything else to say she moved forward and briefly kissed me on the lips. "Goodnight," she whispered, stepping back and slowly closing the door.

I floated across the hallway to my apartment. It took me three tries to slide the card through the key slot.

* * *

The next few days passed quickly for me. With some trepidation, I began carrying the cell phone with me everywhere I went. My stomach was in knots the first day I took it into the plant, but none of the guards treated me any different than normal. I heaved a big sigh of relief when I

made it past the last security checkpoint at the end of the day and began the long walk home.

That same day I started stopping by McCoy's to see Angela after work. Evenings were the busiest time for her business but nothing like the crush of the weekend crowds. I would sit at the bar and talk with her about the day whenever she had a free moment between customers. I drank only soda, though. One experience with a hangover is enough for me, thank you.

Angela introduced me to two of her cousins who also worked at McCoy's. Robert was a bartender and assistant manager who loved to talk. He would regale me with tales about the crazy things he'd seen and done in the outer 'Burbs whenever Angela had to wait on customers. Her other cousin was named Max, a big, burly bruiser with arms as thick as tree trunks who didn't seem to do anything at the bar except sit around and drink the occasional beer. Angela explained that he was in charge of security. It was Max's job to throw out anyone who got too rowdy or caused any problems. I had no doubts that he performed his job with distinction. He looked like he could take on a Crazy or maybe even a Juicer and come out on top.

Each evening as the bar filled, I'd survey the room as discreetly as I could looking for any of the men with whom I'd spoken the first night I'd come in. I didn't really expect to see them, but I watched for them anyway.

I stayed each day for a few hours until the bar started to fill up and Angela got too busy to talk with me. She always made a point of stopping what she was doing and giving me a kiss before I left however, which would result in a few catcalls from the assorted regulars in the bar. The first time she did that, we were standing only a few feet away from her muscular cousin Max. As she kissed me all I could think of was him coming for me with murder etched across his face, but when I looked toward him, he was just shaking his head and laughing. "With every good looking guy who comes in here hitting on you, what in the world made you choose him?" he asked her, giving me a broad wink to soften his words.

"That's exactly the reason I chose Eugene," Angela answered. "He's the only man I've known since puberty who treated me like a person instead of a thing. Sneer if you want," she said when he made a face, "but it was enough to win me over." Then she kissed me again, long and lingering.

I don't think my feet touched the ground as I made my way home that evening.

It was Thursday evening when my cell phone started vibrating. I was walking down the hallway to my apartment after visiting Angela at the bar. Feeling the trembling in my pocket, I sprinted to my door and pushed my way through it, half afraid and half hopeful that whoever was calling would hang up before I could answer. It was dark in my apartment as I pulled the phone out of my pocket and flipped it open.

"H...hello," I said, cradling the phone against my ear as if it were a poisonous snake trying to get away. An electronic buzzing like the sound of a large transformer filled my ear then snapped off.

"Tomorrow, on your way into the plant, you will be met by a man with red hair, wearing the uniform of a Coalition Army officer," an impassive voice said into my ear. "Wait for him in the front parking lot. You will take him with you as you go about your work during the day. Show him whatever he asks to see. When he is ready, you will escort him out of the plant."

"What is he going to do?" I said. My heart was in my throat, and I felt like a vise was squeezing the air out of my lungs.

"He is there to observe the security and operations of the plant," the man at the other end of the line replied.

"How will I—"

"Remember," the voice cut me off. "Show him everything." The phone buzzed in my ear again, then the line went dead.

I stood in the dark of the entryway of my apartment and felt the world around me shudder.

* * *

I was shivering the next morning as I crossed the small parking lot outside the plant's main entrance, though I'm not sure if it was more from the cold October winds that were blowing or the fear that was coursing through my veins. I walked between the rows of ground and hover cars, seeking whatever shelter from the wind I could find. The cars also helped conceal me from anyone who might look my way, and at that moment I felt a great need to be hiding. I'd tossed and turned all night with fearful dreams of what might happen if my unofficial guest was discovered and had arisen in the morning feeling sandy-eyed and tired. Breakfast hadn't helped. All the way to work my mind ran in helpless circles trying to figure out what I could do to escape if something bad happened.

At last I stood at the end of the row of parked vehicles, staring across the driving lane that separated me from the main entrance into the plant. The entranceway was busy as people hurried out of the chill weather into the welcome warmth within. As the doors opened and closed, I glimpsed the security checkpoint within and the guards sitting on their stools next to each security portal into the interior. The wind tore at me as I wondered if they would be able to see the fear on my face as I approached those gateways.

I'd been standing there for only a few minutes when a military hover car dropped from the sky, landing just in front of me. The rear door opened, and a middle-aged man stepped out. He was dressed in the black uniform of a Coalition officer and wearing what looked like an expensive long coat of the same color. On his head he wore a black military cap with the Coalition death's head logo in the middle polished to mirror brightness. The hair under the cap was red. Making eye contact with me, the man broke into a wide smile.

"Ah, Mr. Becton, so good of you to wait for me," he said extending his arm and shaking my weakly proffered hand forcefully. Behind him the hover car rose into the air and departed. "I am Lieutenant Jordan."

"Not a problem," I said without enthusiasm. The man certainly looked the part of a Coalition officer. He stood like a man in charge of the world. His shoes were polished to mirror brightness and the crease in his pants looked newly pressed. The skin of his face was unblemished and his teeth were white and perfectly even. He even had the look of slightly superior disdain in his eyes that seemed ingrained into every Coalition officer I'd ever met.

"Shall we go in?" he asked.

Not trusting myself to speak, I turned and walked toward the entrance, dread building in me with every step. My companion walked beside me with a confident air that seemed to wrap around him like an extra coat against the cold wind. We passed through a set of double doors into the warm air of the entryway and joined one of the lines of workers that led to the security portals. That is, I joined the line. My guest stood next to me in the open space between our line and the next, a haughty expression on his face.

As we advanced in the line, I unzipped my coat and made sure that the security I.D. clipped to the front of my work shirt was clearly visible. The impostor stood next to me, calmly looking about. I marveled at his quiet assurance. My nerves were so frayed that if anyone had sneezed at that moment, I think I would have jumped out of my skin.

As we neared the front of the line, the guard sitting next to our security portal looked us over and then started flipping through the papers on a clipboard that he was holding. When we reached the front of the line, the guard stood up from his stool and approached us.

"May I have your name please?" he asked my companion.

"Lieutenant Jordan, attaché for the Office of Military Procurements," the impostor said with just a trace of arrogance in his voice. "I am here for a quality inspection. Mr. Becton is acting as my escort."

The security officer looked at my I.D. badge and then flipped several more pages on his clipboard. He looked up at us in confusion.

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't have the clearance notice for your visit listed anywhere," he said, obviously nervous at having to question an officer of the Coalition military.

"Really?" the impostor said, turning to me with a slightly offended look on his face. "Mr. Becton, can you explain this irregularity?"

I felt like everyone in the entryway was suddenly staring at me. "My apologies, sir," I stammered. My mental gearbox was locked-up as I looked back and forth between the impostor and the guard.

"I'll need to clear this with Central Security," the guard said a little more confidently. "It should only take a few minutes. If you could wait over there, please." He gestured toward a small alcove in the wall to the side of the lines with a bench built into it. I could see him reaching for his walkie-talkie.

"I don't have time for this," my companion snapped, losing his temper. "I have a very tight schedule to maintain." He pointed his finger back and forth between the guard and me. "You can be sure that I will report this to the Colonel this afternoon when I have lunch with him." He turned and began to walk towards the doors as if to storm out of the building. I looked at the guard, fear and hope playing on my face.

"Wait!" called the guard, a fearful look in his eyes as he dropped his walkie-talkie back into its holder. He took a step toward the retreating figure in black. "Wait!" he called again. The fake officer stopped just before reaching the gray exit doors and slowly swiveled to look at the man.

"It's probably just a typo on the scheduling sheet, that's all," the guard said in a mollifying tone. "It's happened before. There's no need for you to wait." The guard stepped back and waved toward the security portal as if to emphasize his words. Now everyone in the entranceway was looking at us. My heart was in my throat as the fake officer seemed to consider his words. To the guard's obvious relief, the impostor marched back to where we stood.

"Thank you, Mr. Reiser," he said reading the guard's name from the tag on his chest. "Your... assistance this morning will be duly noted in my report." He pushed by me and went to stand in the security portal.

"Man, what's up with him?" the guard said to me in a quiet voice as we watched the impostor stand for several seconds in the portal. I raised my eyebrows and tried to give him a reassuring grin, but it probably looked more like a grimace of pain. He laughed quietly and then motioned me forward as the fake officer stepped beyond the portal. As I took my turn in the security scanner, I hoped that it didn't have a way of detecting my heartbeat because it felt like my heart was about to burst from my chest and run away.

The impostor stood waiting for me on the other side. As we walked away from the entranceway he leaned toward me. "Good job keeping your cool back there," he said in a low voice, his eyes alert and taking in every detail as we walked along the crowded corridor. "I've always found that a little bluster will go a long way in situations like that."

I didn't trust myself to say anything in reply.

A few moments later, we emerged from the corridor onto a catwalk that circled the huge, main assembly floor that spread out before us. The floor was a sea of activity as workers passed by each other, the ones who'd just finished their shift weaving through those just starting. The roof over us was three stories high. Cranes suspended on tracks hung from the ceiling, moving large pieces of equipment from one section to the next. We stopped and people dodged around us. My guest stepped to the railing and looked around. I heard him whistle softly.

"Sure is a big mother." His head slowly swivelled back and forth, taking in the entire floor. "How many people work here?"

That's always the first question new visitors ask when they are brought out on the floor. The sheer volume of the place seems to prompt a need to try to fill it up.

"Close to three thousand during the day, somewhat less at night," I said. "About twenty-five hundred people are out on the floor at any given time." After a few moments, I motioned him along the catwalk toward some stairs that led down to the floor.

On a normal day I move about the floor quite a bit. I specialize in correcting problems in the power systems of the various vehicles that are manufactured at the plant. I usually carry a walkie-talkie, which alerts me to which section is in need of my assistance. Between shifts, I leave it on the charging unit in my supervisor's office, so that was the first place we headed to.

To my relief, my supervisor was on a conference call when we came into his office. I grabbed my walkie-talkie, pointed to the fake Coalition

officer, and made a big circle with my hand to indicate that I would be walking around the building with him. My boss nodded his head respectfully to the impostor, gave me the thumbs up and then returned his attention to the phone cradled against his ear.

I spent the next several hours walking all over the giant complex, showing my companion the different production and assembly areas. I was nervous as we approached the first internal security checkpoint to move to the next floor section. I didn't want a repeat of the confrontation at the entryway. My reputation for escorting visitors about the plant was sufficient to get us through without being challenged, however. After that I began to relax, just a little.

My visitor acted his part perfectly, pointing at things and asking questions, nodding at the area managers as we passed. His slightly superior air and way of talking down to anyone who happened to speak with us put people off enough that no one made any effort to keep us in their area longer than absolutely necessary. As the tour wore on, I began to wonder if this impostor might have actually been a Coalition officer at some time in the past. There are always rumors floating about the 'Burbs of defectors from the Coalition military joining the forces of monsters and mages and becoming traitors to humanity, though it was rare for any of the stories to mention an officer falling away from the true path.

There was one peculiarity to our tour that stood out to me as we progressed. My companion was obsessed with restrooms. Each time we entered a new section of the floor, the first thing my guest would do was ask for directions to the nearest restroom. We would then go to it and he would spend several minutes inside. The first few times I stood patiently outside the door waiting for him, but after the fourth such trip, it started to wear on my nerves. Did the man really have so little control over his bladder?

Halfway through the tour, we were watching a team laboring to install a nuclear power plant into the half-finished frame of a Linebacker hover tank when I heard someone calling my name. I looked up to see Uncle Frank walking towards us. I had been so focused on guiding the fake Coalition officer on his tour that I hadn't recognized we were in his section. I greeted Frank and introduced him to the fake lieutenant. After a brief exchange, Frank excused himself to go back to his work station. As I watched him walk away, I remembered the conversation that I'd had with Angela. I resolved to pay a visit to Frank and his family soon.

I turned back to see the fake Coalition officer watching my old friend move away with a look of cold contempt on his face. A disturbing thought occurred to me as I watched the impostor turn back to the group who were seating the reactor into place.

It was almost noon by the time we finished inspecting the last production area. We had passed the administrative offices an hour before, but my companion had declined walking through them, afraid that his cover might not hold up if we ran into any senior management. There was a look of intense concentration on his face as I escorted him back toward the entryway. I wasn't happy with his reticence. Ever since meeting Frank, I'd been weighing whether or not to voice my concerns, but his lack of communication left me without an opening to ask him what I wanted to know.

As we climbed the stairs onto the metal catwalk that led back to the entrance corridor, he said, "When we go back outside, my hover car will be waiting. After I'm gone, go back to work and don't do anything suspicious. We'll contact you in a few days with further instructions on what we want you to do."

I stopped climbing the stairs and put my hand on his arm.

"What exactly are you going to do?" I asked him before my courage could fail me. I had deliberately kept myself from thinking about that question since the cell phone had been delivered to me, but seeing Uncle Frank again had placed the question front and center in my mind. The impostor raised an eyebrow.

"That hasn't been decided yet," he said looking away from me and pulling on the cuff of his black, long-sleeved coat.

"But you are planning on..."

"Attacking this place?" he finished for me with a faint note of amusement in his voice. He stepped to the edge of the stairs and gripped the

handrail. "More like leveling it." He smiled, looking out over the busy production floor. "When the Commander gets one of his visions, he's like a dynamo; he can't stop until he makes it a reality. He told me he saw this place drenched in blood. I can't wait to see it happen." As he stared at the people below us, the mask of haughty superiority that he'd maintained all morning fell away for a few moments. Beneath it I saw the face of a cold-blooded murderer, someone who fed on the fear and pain he caused in others. Then the mask was back on again.

"Shall we go?" he said as he turned and climbed toward the catwalk.

Through the rest of that shift I couldn't get out of my mind the image of the cold, calculated evil that had momentarily masked the man's face. I needed to talk with someone about what was going on. When the horn signaling the end of the shift finally blew, I made my way out of the plant as fast as I could and headed straight to McCoy's bar.

The place was already half full when I pushed the front door open. I looked for Angela from the doorway, but didn't see her. After a moment, I spotted Max making his way through the crowd in my direction. He was holding two middle-aged men by their shirt collars, pushing them ahead of him towards the door. I dodged aside as he threw both out, barely missing a group of four women who were about to come inside. He stepped out of the way of the ladies then leaned out the door and said something I didn't hear to the two men who were groaning as they picked themselves up off the street. He turned around with a self-satisfied smirk and saw me.

"Eugene! Good to see you man. How's it going?"

"Do you know where Angela is?" I asked, trying to mask my unease.

"Didn't show up for work today, bro," Max said, eyeing a young man dressed in black leather with a green Mohawk who was walking by.

"She isn't here?"

"Yeah, Robert told me she was sick or something. It's weird 'cause she doesn't ever get sick." Max shrugged, still watching the young punk as he sat down at a table filled with other, similarly dressed young people.

I was out the door and running down the street before my mind caught up with me. The thought of Angela, ill and all alone in her apartment, inspired an inexplicable panic in me that was enough to drive thoughts of Hell's Fist and their plans completely from my mind.

I stumbled into the elevator of our apartment building gasping for breath and sweating beneath the hat and coat that I was wearing. As the elevator crawled upward, I stripped them off and wiped the sweat from my face with the sleeve of my work shirt. Finally, the bell chimed and the doors opened. Trying to control my worry, I walked to Angela's door. She didn't answer the first time I knocked. With a feeling of nearly uncontrolled panic I raised my hand again. "Angela!" I called as I knocked. After a few eternal moments, the door cracked open.

"Eugene?" I heard Angela say. A wave of relief like cool water swept through me. The door opened a bit wider, and she leaned her head around the edge to look at me. She looked awful. Her hair, free of any restraint, formed a frizzy halo around her head. Her eyes were bloodshot and puffy, her skin was flushed, and it was obvious from how red her nose was that she had been blowing it a lot. But she still smiled at me. "Hi," she said in a congested voice.

"Angela," I said then stopped. It was so obvious that she was miserable. My whole heart went out to her. "Max told me you were sick."

"Yeah, when I was walking into work this afternoon I started to feel bad, so I came back home."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, I'm alright. It's just a cold I think. Excuse me," she said. Her head disappeared behind the door and I heard a strangled gurgling sound as she blew her nose. The momentary break in contact got my brain going again. Then her head reappeared.

"Let me make you some soup," I offered as I mentally ran through the inventory of my cupboard.

"You don't need to do that," she protested, though I could hear a note of yearning in her voice.

"Yes, I do," I said, with a smile.

"All right."

"I'll be back in twenty minutes," I told her, moving toward my door.

"I'll be here," she promised.

It took only a few minutes for me to get the ingredients assembled and a pot of water boiling on the stove in my apartment kitchen. If there was one advantage to spending so much of my time alone, it was that I had taught myself how to be a fairly proficient cook. I was busy slicing celery into bite-sized chunks when the cell phone in my pocket began to vibrate. I cradled the phone to my ear with my shoulder and went back to chopping as the electronic buzz sounded in my ear.

"Hello?" I said when the line became quiet again.

"Mr. Becton, I wanted to thank you for helping get Mr. Jordan into the factory this morning. His mission was a great success."

I recognized the voice of the man I had met in the bar a week before. I was a bit surprised that he would call me. "It was no problem," I lied, scraping the bits of celery off the chopping block into the pot. "Did you get everything you needed?" I started peeling a couple of carrots, hoping that since things had gone so well this morning, maybe they wouldn't need me anymore.

"For now. We'll let you know what else we'll need you to do soon."

"Umm, about that," I said. "I was just wondering if what you're planning to do will, uh..." I trailed off not sure how to ask the question I was burning to know. I had heard the stories everyone told about Hell's Fist, along with the occasional newscast. They were supposed to be devoid of mercy or compassion. But was that really true? Sure, the fake Lieutenant Jordan was a stuck up jerk, but no more so than all the Coalition officers I had given tours to. Maybe I had misinterpreted his words; maybe Hell's Fist wasn't as bad as people thought. After all, Dennis had been upbeat and cheerful, and even the D-Bee, Adger, had seemed pleasant enough. Maybe their reputation for being bloodthirsty monsters was just Coalition propaganda. But how could I know for certain?

"Yes?" the Commander prompted me.

"Well, uh, I mean there are a lot of people who work out there and, uh, I wasn't sure if you were planning on, well, you know..." I couldn't summon the courage to ask the question directly.

"On what?" he asked in a perfectly calm voice.

"Well, umm, you know, a... a lot of the people who work there that aren't even Coalition citizens," I said, trying a different tack. "They just work there because they need to provide for their families." My forehead had broken out in a sweat, though I couldn't tell if it was from the heat coming from the stovetop where the pot of water was beginning to steam or from the tension I felt.

"There are many ways of providing for one's family, Mr. Becton. How one does so is a reflection of a person's character. Their choice of employment will prove to be unfortunate, I think." The utter indifference in his voice sent a shiver up my spine.

"But they haven't done anything wrong," I protested, thinking of Uncle Frank and his family.

"That depends on one's perspective. They work to support our enemies, those who have rejected and persecuted us for nothing more than who and what we are. They have freely chosen to do this. No one forces them to work there."

Yeah right, I wanted to say. It was obvious this guy hadn't grown up in the 'Burbs. Here, if you were lucky enough to find a job, you did whatever it took to keep it because there was no guarantee of ever finding another. Hunger was the greatest slave-driver in the world.

I started cutting up the carrots, chopping through them harder than was necessary. "But the people at the plant haven't done anything to you," I said.

"The friend of my enemy is my enemy, Mr. Becton." The indifference was gone, replaced by cold malice like ice.

That was it, my answer. The stories were true. I was silent as I cradled the phone to my ear, chopping the carrots into little pieces. He was going to do it. He and the other members of Hell's Fist were going to kill as many of the people out at the plant as they could, including Uncle Frank. And I was helping them.

"You seem to have some reservations about assisting us, Mr. Becton," he said as if reading my thoughts.

"No! No, I just, uh..." I transferred the bits of carrot to the pot, accidentally spilling some on the range where they tumbled down next to the electric heating element. I grabbed a towel and wiped them into the sink trying to sort out my thoughts and feelings. I grabbed a half head of cabbage and began cutting it into strips.

"How is Ms. McCoy feeling?"

The question froze me in my tracks.

"How did you-"

"Just because you haven't seen us, doesn't mean we haven't been watching you, Mr. Becton," the man laughed softly in my ear. Max's comment on how Angela had never called in sick to work before jumped to the front of my mind. My grip tightened on the handle of the knife.

"Did you-"

"Ms. McCoy will be fine in a day or two," the voice on the line cut me off again. "We have no wish to permanently damage your young lady-friend; at least, not at this time. Nor do we wish to involve your Uncle Frank and his fine family in this affair. We just wanted you to appreciate our... capabilities in this regard."

They knew about Uncle Frank too? The thought staggered me. Of course, Lieutenant Jordan... The knife in my hand trembled as a cold fury began to grow inside of me.

"Leave all of them out of this," I hissed into the phone.

"Any future contact we may have with Ms. McCoy or your Uncle Frank and his family is strictly dependent upon you, Mr. Becton," the calm voice in my ear informed me. "I can assure you we will not harm any of them - as long as you continue to offer your complete assistance."

He let that sink in for a moment, then said, "You will help us, Mr. Becton, whether you want to or not."

I stared at the wall in front of me as the phone buzzed in my ear and then went dead. After a few moments, I folded it back up and put it in my pocket. I realized that my hand was aching from holding the handle of the knife so tightly. I put the knife down and flexed my fingers, looking at my hand as I slowly becoming conscious of the decision I had just made.

Angela was appreciative of the soup when I delivered it ten minutes later. I served it to her in a large plastic bowl I retrieved from a cupboard in her kitchen as she sat wrapped in a colorful blanket on her couch. It was obvious that, even feeling as bad as she did, she'd tried to make herself as presentable as possible while I'd been making the soup. She had pulled her hair into a loose ponytail and washed her face. She looked adorable as she sat using a small, white handkerchief to gently wipe her nose as I brought the soup to her. I stayed long enough to make sure that she was comfortable and had everything she needed before excusing myself with a promise to check on her in the morning. I didn't want her to feel obligated to try to be a hostess to me, and I wanted more time to think about the plan that had come to me as I'd worked on the soup in my kitchen.

The next morning I prepared a light breakfast of sugared oatmeal, milk and buttered toast. I carried it across the hallway on a folding tray that I usually used to eat on while watching the TV. Angela answered her door almost before I finished knocking. She looked much better than she had the night before, though her nose was still red. She smiled and let me in.

"It's not the most exciting breakfast in the world," I said as I set the tray up next to her dinner table and started transferring the items onto it, "but I didn't know how you liked your eggs cooked." I finished with the setup by presenting a napkin to her across my forearm with a slight bow as she sat down.

"Sunny side up, but this is just fine," she said with a laugh. I smiled. I should have known.

I sat at the table and watched her as she ate her breakfast, replying to her occasional comment while I went over and over in my mind what I needed to tell her. I knew what I had to do, but I had no idea how she would respond. No matter what her reaction though, I needed to make sure she wouldn't be in any more danger.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked me when she had eaten about half of the bowl of oatmeal and most of the toast.

I looked at her and took a deep breath.

"Angela, I have to tell you something." She sensed the change in the atmosphere and put down the piece of toast she'd been holding.

"What is it?" she asked as I pondered my next words.

"I'm not sure how to tell you this, so it's probably not going to come out right," I said. I toyed with a crumb that had fallen on the table. "This past week has been the happiest week of my entire life. You've made me feel things that I've never felt before." I looked into her eyes. "I think I've fallen in love with you."

Angela reached across the table and took my hand. Before she could say anything I rushed on.

"Because of that love I've put you in terrible danger."

A look of confusion crossed her face as my words sank in. "What do you mean?" she asked.

I looked down at the table again and tried to pull my hand from hers, but she just gripped it harder, not letting me go.

"Angela, I lied to you," I said, dragging the words from the depths of my soul. "My whole life I've been trying to do one thing: get into Chi-Town. It was all my parents wanted for me from before I was born. They talked about it every day. The day my mom died I promised myself that I would do whatever it took to get in."

"Everything I've done since that day has been with that one goal in mind. I cut off contact with friends so that if they did something wrong, it wouldn't reflect poorly on me. I've worked hard, kept my record clean, and followed every law and directive that was ever issued by the Coalition. I even went further than that! I'd never gone in a bar before last Friday: I didn't want to risk getting drunk and doing something that could've gotten me rejected."

My free hand balled into a fist on my lap. "I've never even had a girlfriend," I said with contempt. "I was always afraid that if I fell in love, when I was accepted into Chi-Town, she wouldn't be." The years of loneliness surged around me again, threatening to drown me. I clung to Angela's hand.

"Then last week, before I came into the bar, my application for entry into Chi-Town was rejected for the second time. The last time."

"I wondered about that," Angela said in a thoughtful voice. "You looked so depressed when you came in. I'd never seen you that way before, not in all the times you walked by on your way to and from work." She shook my hand until I looked up at her. "It's okay," she said. "I understand why you didn't want to tell me when I asked about it before. The rejection still hurt too much. You needed time." She squeezed my hand. "I'd hardly say it puts me in danger though – quite the opposite, in fact."

"There's more," I said, looking back down at the crumb on the tabletop. "I met some people at McCoy's that night."

I sketched in for her how I'd been led from the bar to the table where the group was sitting and the way the conversation had turned against the Coalition States. She listened, snorting in disgust when I mentioned the story of the shepherd's dog.

"I can't believe he told you he'd seen that happen. That story's been around forever. I've can't tell you how many people have told it to me at work. There's no way he could have seen it, if it ever really happened." She shook her head. "People always use that story when they want to show someone just how bad the Coalition treats its people. I'm not saying they don't have some big flaws," she said quickly when I looked up at her. "It's just that people get so focused on the bad things about the Coalition that they end up painting every citizen and soldier with the same brush. They forget that there are good people in the Coalition, too."

"I don't think Hell's Fist would agree with you," I said quietly.

Angela's hand went rigid in mine. I looked at her. She was staring past me, her eyes completely unreadable. After a moment she looked back at me. "You mean..."

I nodded. "I didn't know who they were then," I explained. "All I knew was that I wanted to hurt the Coalition as badly as they'd hurt me, and the men at the table said they could help. It wasn't until a couple days later that I found out just who I'd made a deal with."

I told her about Dennis and Adger's visit, the tour of the plant and the anxiety I'd felt after my final conversation with the fake officer. Angela

listened as I spoke, her eyes never leaving mine and an expression of tense worry on her face.

"I went to McCoy's after I left the plant yesterday because I needed to talk with you about all this, but you weren't there. Max told me you were sick, so I came here. We talked, and I went to make you some soup. That's when the cell phone they'd given me started to vibrate. It was the man I'd talked with at the bar, the one they call the Commander. Somehow, they knew about the doubts that I'd been having. He was calling to make sure that I was going to keep helping them. I was going to tell him no, but..." I paused, praying that Angela would forgive me for what I was about to tell her, "then he asked me how you were feeling."

Angela stared at me as I fell silent. Her hand grew slack in mine as I saw comprehension dawn in her face. After a moment, her gaze fell to the table, her brow wrinkled in thought. I barely breathed. My heart felt like it was in a vise as I waited to see what she would do. The clock on the wall ticked off seconds at a glacial pace. Then Angela clutched my hand in a fierce grip as she looked up at me.

"What are you planning to do?"

* * *

Monday morning dawned clear, cold and windless as I walked to work, my breath coming out in puffs of white fog. Huddled under my jacket, I hoped that none of my coworkers could see how tense I was as I made my way through the frigid air into the entryway of the plant. Passing through the security portals and entering the main section of the building, I turned away from the corridor leading to the production floor and entered the hallway that led to the offices devoted to plant management. This was something that Angela and I had argued over. I had thought to go to the head of security to tell them what was going on, but she'd thought that they might change their normal routines and thereby alert the members of Hell's Fist. She had persuaded me instead to go directly to upper management, most of whom were Coalition citizens and residents of Chi-Town, who could summon the authorities from the city without undue notice. And I knew just the person I wanted to talk to.

Tom Edwina is a short, balding man who looks like he's in his mid-forties but is actually closer to eighty. A resident of Chi-Town his whole life, Tom lacks the characteristic arrogance that every other citizen of the great city seems to have ingrained into their psyche. I first met Tom about ten years ago when I was asked to give him and several other new executives a tour of the facility on the day that they started with the company. An engineer by training, Tom likes to get down in the guts of a machine to see how it works. That day, as the other new executives had stood back whispering to each other and looking on with disdainful expressions, Tom had donned a pair of coveralls and moved among the teams on the line, questioning them on how they did things and why. At one point he had even crawled under a power converter with me to better understand how the linkages fit together. A few weeks later, several changes took place in the processes of the plant that helped to streamline production. Since that time, Tom had been on the floor at least once a month, talking with the workers and keeping up to date on what the production lines were doing and why. I had never had the chance to speak with him again since our tour, but he had a reputation of being smart, efficient, and approachable. That last trait was why I went to his office that morning.

Tom's secretary, a mousy looking older lady named Eileen Summer, proved to be as nice as her boss. When I inquired if I might have a chance to speak with Tom on a matter of extreme urgency, she checked his schedule, asked my name, and walked into his office. A few moments later, Tom followed her out. With a word of thanks to his secretary, he ushered me into his rather large office and closed the door. Pointing me to a chair, he walked around his desk and sat down.

"You'll have to forgive me if I shuffle some paperwork as we talk. There always seems to be more paperwork than one can keep up with in this job. What can I do for you?" Tom said as he picked up a pile of forms and started thumbing through them.

"Hell's Fist is planning to attack this plant within the next few days," I said without preamble.

Tom stopped sorting through his forms and looked up at me.

"What makes you say that?"

"They have a spy who's helping them, someone who works here. They've already surveyed the entire production floor." I used the word spy deliberately. It sets off bells in the head of every Coalition citizen.

Tom set the papers he'd been holding carefully down on his desk. He folded his hands together and gave me a look as direct as a laser beam.

"How did you find out about this?" he said.

"I'm the spy." I said as I looked him straight in the eye, keeping my face impassive. Behind my calm facade my heart was pumping at a terrifying speed. This was the riskiest part of the plan that Angela and I had hammered out over the weekend. I could very well spend the rest of my life in a Coalition prison for my part in this – that is, if they didn't just shoot me as a traitor to humanity. But I had worried that if I didn't reveal my participation my warning might not be taken seriously. After all, the plant was several times larger than any other target that Hell's Fist or any other Retribution Squad had ever hit before.

Tom stared at me for a full minute as if trying to read the truth of my words like they were engraved on the inside of my skull. Then he reached over without looking and keyed his intercom. "Ms. Summer, please get Captain Richmond of the Chi-Town ISS on the line for me."

My next few hours were spent rehearsing my story over and over, first to Tom, then to Captain Richmond after he arrived, then to a psychic who was brought in by the Captain who asked the same questions again and again. I think she was trying to find any deviations in my account, but there were none. I had told the complete truth from the get-go. I knew that any lie I told would be uncovered. That didn't stop her from asking, though.

During my questioning I never left Tom's office, even as the traffic of people in and out of the room increased. By noon, the spacious workspace had become cramped. At an early point in my interrogation the cell phone I'd been given was taken from me to be examined by some technical people who'd set up shop in one corner of the office. I also heard the ISS Captain order a search of both Angela's and my apartments without even a look in my direction.

After several hours, the pace of activity began to slacken. The psychic who'd interrogated me stood and took her pad of notes over to where Captain Richmond stood speaking on the phone on Tom's desk. The captain looked at her, and she handed her notepad to him. At that moment, Tom came over to me with a large water bottle in his hand.

"Here, you must be thirsty," he said, handing me the water bottle and sitting down in the chair that my interrogator had just vacated. He grinned at me. "You sure know how to liven up a dull day."

I wearily returned his grin and drank from the water bottle. The cool water washed over my throat with welcome relief. Captain Richmond approached us with my cell phone in hand and the psychic in tow. Everyone else had been ushered out of the office.

"Mr. Becton, first off I want to thank you for bringing this matter to our attention," the captain said, pulling up a chair and sitting down next to us. "You are an extraordinarily brave man. Most residents of the 'Burbs would not have had the courage to do the right thing in a situation like this. I think that the Citizenry Board may have made a mistake when they turned down your application." I nodded my head at the compliment but didn't say anything. My fate was in this man's hands and everyone there knew it.

"As you know, Hell's Fist is an incredibly dangerous and cunning group. They have the ability to seemingly appear out of nowhere to strike and then vanish like smoke in the wind. We've been at a loss in our attempts to contain and eliminate them. The information you've given us provides us the opportunity to change that." He toyed with the phone in his hands.

"I know that you would like to put all of this behind you, but I'm afraid that I'm going to have to ask more of you." He rested his elbows on his knees and looked me in the eye. "Our greatest problem in eradicating any of these terrorist groups is being able to locate them in the first

place. If we know when they will be in a particular location, we have the means to eliminate them in short order. You've presented us with a unique opportunity. Thanks to you we know where Hell's Fist is going to attack. Now what we need is the time of their planned operation." He held up a hand to forestall my objection.

"I'm aware that you don't know when they are planning their attack. However, from past investigations into their methods of operation and from what they've said to you, we believe it is highly likely that they will ask for your participation in preparing for their attack. Because of the nature of the guerrilla warfare that they are waging against the Coalition, we believe they will act quickly against this facility. Any delay on their part only increases their chances of being discovered. To avoid unnecessary risks, they will try to get you to do their dirty work for them as close to the actual time of the attack as possible. Thus they may not tell you when they are going to attack, but when they do ask for your help, it will be an indication that they are planning on moving very soon." He looked me in the eye. "What I would like you to do Mr. Becton is to continue to cooperate with them for the time being and keep us informed, through Tom's office, of the tasks that they give you to do."

I nodded as he finished. I had expected this. I wasn't happy about acting as a double agent for the Coalition, but I had no choice in the matter. I didn't even try to hide my reluctance as I accepted the assignment. It would have been a futile gesture anyway with the psychic standing behind the Captain's chair.

"I won't pretend that there is not an element of danger in this for you," Captain Richmond said. "We know for a fact that Hell's Fist has had an inside man on many of the other attacks that they have executed. We know this because they have always killed that person immediately after the attack was accomplished."

A cold chill ran down my spine.

"We can't guarantee your safety or that of Miss McCoy in this operation Mr. Becton, but we'll do what we can for the both of you. We're sure that the entire faction of Hell's Fist will be needed to attack a target of this size. It's our hope that we'll be able to capture or kill the entire group when they try. In the end, that's our best shot at not only ending their attacks on our interests, but also of assuring the safety of both Miss McCoy and yourself."

The Captain and Tom stood, and after a moment, so did I. With a nod of his head, he handed the cell phone back to me, turned to shake Tom's hand, and then walked out of the office with the female psychic walking behind him. As the door closed, Tom turned toward me.

"Well, that was exciting," he said with a grin.

* * *

Angela flew into my arms as I came into McCoy's that evening. Her cousin Robert, standing at the bar wiping down a glass, grinned and winked at me over her shoulder.

"How'd your day go?" Angela asked as she released me and took a step back, holding my hand. Her eyes were large and worried, but her voice betrayed none of her pent up emotions.

"Everything went just fine," I said in our prearranged signal. We had no way of knowing if we were being watched, but it was better to play things safe for the time being. I could see the tension bleed out of Angela's gaze, though she gave no other sign of her relief. I walked her to the bar as she told me of her day.

I spent the next two hours eating peanuts and sipping a cola, alternately talking with Angela, Robert and Max as the barroom slowly filled. Several of the regular patrons greeted me as they came in. Despite the danger that I faced, I found myself relaxing in the friendly atmosphere that permeated the pub. I left the bar that evening with a great deal of reluctance, not just because I was leaving Angela but also because it was a place where I was coming to feel like I belonged.

The street outside was cold as I walked to my apartment building. The sky had a few clouds in it that the setting sun dyed in a spectacular array of molten colors. Bemused by the scene, I entered the foyer of my building to see a grizzled old man dressed in ragged clothing sitting

cross-legged on the ground. On the floor next to him was a small box wrapped in plain brown paper. When he saw me enter, he laboriously rose to his feet, picked up the package and shuffled toward me.

"Thought you'd never get here," he said in a gruff voice. "Here, this is yours."

He shoved the package into my stomach and continued past me toward the exit.

"What is this? Who are you?" I said, catching him by the elbow.

"Name's Sid and I don't know what's in that there box," he said, jerking his arm out of my grasp. "Didn't get paid to ask questions, just to give it to you." He shuffled to the door and walked out without a backward glance.

I headed for my apartment, holding the package close. Once inside I put it on my kitchen table and carefully opened it. Inside were two boxes, one slightly larger than the other, and a handwritten note:

Take these to work with you tomorrow. Stick the cameras in the bathrooms where they'll have a good view of the entire room. Place one plug next to each emergency exit where they won't be seen with the side marked with an X on bottom. Make sure you're done before noon.

Curious, I opened the larger box. Inside was a plastic bag full of tiny monitoring cameras and a tube of epoxy glue. I took one of the cameras out and looked at it. It was a black plastic cube about one inch square. A small lens assembly extended from one side. On the back of the camera a tiny, unlit LED bulb protruded. I put the camera back in the bag with the others and opened the smaller box.

The second box was half filled with gray disks about two inches wide and a quarter inch thick. I picked one up and examined it, noting that it was heavier than what I'd expected. One side had a small X marked across it with what looked like a black marker. Other than that, it was completely unremarkable. I placed the disk back in its box then closed the package and hid it under a coat in my entryway closet.

Before I went to bed that night, I set my alarm clock fifteen minutes earlier than normal. I wanted to get in early enough to alert Captain Richmond and give the ISS plenty of time to mount their response. I figured that going in early shouldn't alarm the member's of Hell's Fist since it would be natural that I would want to make sure I had enough time to place all the cameras and plugs before the noon deadline. Then I climbed into bed and lay staring up at the ceiling in the dark.

I woke half an hour before the alarm went off. I used the bathroom then laid back down, knowing there was no way I would be able to fall asleep again no matter how much I wanted to. After staring into the pre-dawn darkness for ten minutes, I finally got up again and turned off the alarm on the clock.

My stomach had compacted into a sphere of cold lead as I'd dressed, so I skipped breakfast that morning. It ended up that I was ready almost an hour before the time I would normally leave for work. I paced around the apartment for a few minutes, but other than my television and sparse furniture, there was nothing to look at. "Maybe I should get some pictures," I thought, staring at the bare concrete of my bedroom wall. "At least it would bring some color into this place."

At last I gave in to my impatience. I put on my heavy winter coat (as its deep pockets would be more suitable for carrying the cameras and plugs unnoticed) and carefully emptied the bags, one in each pocket. As an afterthought, I stuffed the note in a third pocket as I walked out the door.

As I passed Angela's door, I had the sudden urge to knock on it but stopped myself. She worked late each night, and it would've been selfish to wake her. I hoped that by the time I next saw her everything would be over with. "If I live through this," I thought as the elevator doors closed in front of me.

It was cold outside as I hurried toward the plant that morning. A solid overcast of low clouds hid the stars and covered the top of Chi-Town, making the trip darker than usual. I was relieved when I finally stepped into the light and warmth of the main entranceway at the plant. Then my stomach flipped.

Because I'd arrived so much earlier than usual, the typical crowd of workers moving through the security portals hadn't formed yet. There

were no lines. In fact, only two of the portals had people standing in them at the moment. I was conscious of all the guards watching me I approached. A bored looking guard waved me toward his portal. As I stepped into it, I belatedly realized that I didn't know if the guards had been informed of my unique situation or if the items in my pockets would be detected by the security apparatus. I broke into a sweat as the machinery around me hummed to life. After a few eternal seconds, one of the guards behind the monitoring desks waved me through without looking up from his screen. Relief swept through me as I stepped out of the portal and quickly followed the path that I had taken the day before to Tom's office.

Eileen Summer was at her desk stirring a cup of coffee when I entered her domain. She looked up, smiled and said, "Just go on in, they're waiting for you." Puzzled, I walked past her and into Tom's office.

Tom and Captain Richmond were inside leaning over Tom's desk poring over a large diagram of the plant as I entered. Several other men, some in ISS uniforms and the rest in Coalition Army fatigues, were grouped around a folding table that had been set up in a corner of the room. All conversation died as I closed the door behind me.

"Eugene," Tom said as he walked toward me, extending his hand to shake mine. "Come on in." He drew me toward the desk where the Captain stood, regarding me. The men at the folding table returned to their work.

"How did you know I was coming?" I asked Tom as he led me to the desk and handed me a large paper cup filled with orange juice.

"My men placed cameras in your apartment yesterday when they visited," Captain Richmond explained, also shaking my hand. "We saw last night that you had received a package and surmised that it had to do with what we discussed yesterday, so we made sure to get here early today."

I covered the sudden flare of resentment I felt at the violation of my privacy by taking a large gulp of orange juice. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Residents of the 'Burbs are not Coalition citizens. Certain rights that the ISS wouldn't dare ignore inside Chi-Town are trampled without a thought when dealing with the denizens who live outside it.

Beckoning over two of the men in fatigues, Captain Richmond turned back to me. "May we see what was in the package?" he said.

I pulled a camera and one of the plugs out of my pockets and handed them the two men in fatigues as they came to the desk. The man with the camera looked it over then handed it back and turned to his companion, who was examining the plug. With a glance toward the Captain for permission, they moved away from us and began talking to each other in low voices.

"This was in the box too," I said, handing the note to the Captain. He started reading and I saw his eyes go wide after a few moments.

"So that's how..." he breathed. He looked up to see Tom and I watching him. Clearing his throat, he said, "This note clears up one of the major questions we've had concerning the manner in which Hell's Fist operates," the Captain said. "We've suspected for quite some time that they use some type of teleportation to infiltrate a target right before an attack, but there are risks associated with that method of transportation. Without an intimate knowledge of an area, the person initiating the teleportation risks appearing inside of a solid object. There's also the risk of discovery by people in the target area if they are present when you arrive. The cameras they gave Mr. Becton would solve both problems in one stroke."

Tom had been reading the upside down note held by the Captain. "But why put the cameras in the bathrooms?" he said.

"They only have so many members who can teleport either magically or as a natural ability. The ones who can't do it on their own have to be brought in by those who can," the Captain said as he turned back toward the diagram of the plant on Tom's desk. "My guess is that they'll teleport several agents into each bathroom and hide them in the stalls. Then when they're all in place, they can attack from several points at once. There are a total of twelve bathrooms spread around the main assembly floor," he said waving a hand over the diagram. "If they put a few agents into each, they'll be positioned to cover almost the entire floor without having to move very far from their points of insertion."

"It'd be like shooting fish in a barrel," Tom said, looking over the diagram as well.

The two men in army fatigues who had taken the plug from me came back to the desk. One of them had scraped the gray paint off one face of the plug, revealing a tight combination of copper and gold wires and a few small gems underneath.

"They're the same type of glue bombs that they've used before," one of the men reported to the Captain, handing the device to him. At the questioning looks on Tom's and my faces, the man explained. "The devices generate a magical effect that spreads over the surrounding area for a period of time. Anyone stepping into that area gets stuck in place, sort of like a super-fly paper. The plugs make the exits useless."

"Worse than that. Anyone trying to get away would become a sitting duck," Tom said, staring with revulsion at the disk the Captain held.

The Captain nodded at the two men who'd examined the plug, and they went back over to the folding table.

"I think we know enough now to start firming up our plans for the operation," Captain Richmond said, placing the plug down on a corner of the desk and turning his attention back to the diagram. Tom moved around the desk to the far corner, away from the device.

"We'll have your people go about their usual routines for most of the morning," the Captain said, ignoring Tom's movements. "When we see the first terrorists appear, I'll send my men out to brief your section leaders. By the time most of the members of Hell's Fist are in place, we'll have the workers organized to evacuate. We'll send them out the emergency exits as soon as the first shots are fired."

"Doesn't that risk some of them getting hurt?" Tom said, looking away from the plug toward the Captain.

"There is the possibility, though they should be well shielded both by my troops and the equipment on the floor."

"Why not move everyone out before the attack?" I said.

"Hell's Fist is almost certainly watching the plant right now," the captain said, glancing at me. "They'd see anyone who came out the emergency exits. If we start moving people out too early, we risk scaring them off. Don't worry, Mr. Becton, we'll keep your friends safe. Sergeant Grondin," he called to the group huddled over the folding table. One of the ISS men, a muscular man with dark skin and a handlebar mustache, looked up from the far side of the table. "Would you please go with Mr. Becton as he performs his tasks around the facility, but be careful to stay out of the bathrooms." The man saluted and started toward us. The Captain turned back to me. "I think it's about time for you to start planting those cameras," he said.

I started to walk toward the office door. As Sergeant Grondin fell into step with me, the Captain called. "You might want to put all of these in that container over there," he said, as he tossed the plug that had been on the desk over to me. I caught it and looked in the direction indicated. A white cylinder stood in a corner of the office, its thick metal walls visible through the open top. A heavy lid sat on the floor next to it. The death's head symbol emblazoned on the side of the cylinder stared at me implacably as I moved toward it.

For the next three hours I moved about the facility gluing the cameras over mirrors, on the edges of light fixtures and in corners up near the ceiling. I caught some odd looks from a few of the men who came in to make use of the bathrooms and saw me standing on counters or over toilets, but no one bothered to ask me what I was doing.

I discovered to my misfortune that Sergeant Grondin had a sense of humor after I explained to him just what it was that I was doing. He found the thought of secret cameras in public men's rooms to be uproariously funny. While I worked inside each restroom, he stood outside dreaming up perverse practical jokes that could be played on the poor men being observed unawares. He would share his musings with me as we trekked to the next restroom, often laughing so hard he would have to wipe tears from his eyes. He was quite...imaginative. I hadn't considered my mission in that particular light before. I'm certain that Hell's Fist hadn't either.

It was just past eleven thirty in the morning when I glued the last camera in place on the side of the exit sign above a bathroom door. As

I checked its placement one last time, I saw the glow of the LED on the back of the camera reflected on the wall behind it. The camera had been turned on. Knowing that someone was watching me at that moment, I stepped off the upside down garbage can I'd used as a step stool and looked back up at the camera. Out of sheer bravado, I smiled and gave the camera a thumbs-up before righting the trash can and exiting the restroom.

A few minutes later, Sergeant Grondin was chuckling over his latest joke about cameras in bathrooms as we climbed the stairs up to the catwalk that circled the production floor. I stopped as I saw men in ISS uniforms walking out on the floor up and down the length of the building. A dreadful anticipation had begun to fill me as time had ticked by toward the hour of the anticipated attack, and the LED light had intensified that feeling enormously. Ignoring Grondin, I stepped to the rail to watch as the uniformed officers approached the leader of each section. After a brief exchange, the section leader would begin assembling the workers he was in charge of. The machines that each team operated were left running as the men were gathered. After a few minutes, the individual groups began to move, converging in the aisle ways and heading toward each end of the building. The entire process looked oddly fluid. I turned to climb the rest of the stairs to the walkway feeling strangely reassured.

Tom's office was a beehive of activity when we entered it a minute later. The folding table that had been set up to one side of Tom's desk had been joined by three others, each surrounded by people. Opposite them, the length of one wall of the office was now taken up by a series of monitors set up on plastic tripods; seated in front of each was a Coalition Army soldier wearing a microphone headset. Half the monitors showed the plant's restrooms; the rest showed other, more confusing scenes where the cameras were in motion, making their way to various points of the plant's assembly floor. More people in uniform, some army and some ISS, moved between the groups and in and out of the office. The murmur of multiple conversations filled the air.

Sergeant Grondin moved to join the group around one of the folding tables, leaving me to stand alone by the door. I looked around, but neither Tom nor Captain Richmond was present. I wandered over toward the monitoring stations trying to be inconspicuous. Not an easy thing to do when you're the only person in the room who isn't wearing a uniform.

I was looking over the shoulder of one of the soldiers seated in front of a monitor when I saw Eileen Summer come into the office. She did a quick scan and then zeroed in on me. She beckoned me to follow as she turned and exited the room. I hurried out and found her in the busy corridor outside her normally sedate waiting room. She motioned for me to follow her down the hall.

"So how are you holding up?" she asked as I fell into step beside her. She was wearing a simple white blouse and black skirt, and her high heeled shoes clicked with every step as we walked. Excitement gleamed in her eyes.

"I've had better mornings."

"I can imagine," she laughed.

"Where are we going?" I asked as we rounded a corner and came to an abrupt stop. A large number of soldiers in full armor were walking in double file, filling the corridor as they made their way down the hall opposite of the direction we were going.

"Tom and the Captain asked me to find you," Ms. Summer said above the noise of the troops moving by. "They're in the boardroom just down this hall." She glanced at the soldiers. "Isn't it exciting? They've been bringing the soldiers to the plant all morning, hidden in the trailers that normally bring in parts and supplies. They have to come down this corridor to avoid being seen out on the floor."

I looked at the soldiers passing us. All were in full body armor and heavily armed. Looking at their black and white skeletal armor, I had a new appreciation for the slang term Dead Boy in reference to the soldiers of the Coalition States. Anyone going up against these guys was sure to wind up dead.

After the column had passed, Eileen led me to a set of wooden double doors that were being guarded by a pair of identical Dog Boys. The tall mutant animals looked like Dobermans and both held large energy rifles

across their chests. Ms. Summer showed her ID badge to them and then walked through the doorway, patting one of the animals on the arm. The Dog Boy grinned as she passed, giving me a view of sharp, white teeth.

The boardroom was hushed and dark as we entered. A large bank of monitors, built into the far wall of the room, provided the only illumination. A wooden conference table, surrounded with comfortable chairs, occupied the center of the room. All but one of the seats around the table were filled with senior management people or men and women in uniform. As my eyes adjusted, I spotted Tom sitting on one side but couldn't see Captain Richmond. More people, most in business suits but a few wearing ISS uniforms, stood along the walls.

"You did well," Captain Richmond said quietly as he stepped through the door behind us. He took my hand for a brief moment then motioned toward the monitor. "Our troops are in position, and we've got just enough Psi-Nullifiers in place to stop anyone who might try to teleport back out. Hell's Fist won't know what hit 'em." He glanced at the monitors again. "It should start any time now." Nodding to Ms. Summer, he moved to the empty seat at the table.

Everyone was staring at the monitors now as they showed alternating black and white video surveillance shots; half were devoted to the interiors of the bathrooms, the other half showed the work areas adjacent to the restrooms. The work-floor shots showed large numbers of Dead Boys and Dog Boys moving stealthily into position close to the restroom doors. The other monitors, switching views seemingly at random, showed the various bathrooms where men – and beings that were definitely not men – were starting to exit the stalls.

Standing there in the near-dark, fear battled anticipation inside me. For a brief moment I caught a glimpse of the Dragonmage who had been in my apartment. He was talking with what looked like a D-Bee who had long swords in place of hands. Then something shifted the camera and I jumped. The face of the man who I had drunk beer with, the one known as the Commander, filled the screen. His eyes seemed to bore right through the glass and drive into me. My breath caught in my throat for what seemed an eternity. Then his face moved back, giving a clear view of the restroom he was in and the five other beings, including the Dragonmage, that were there. He raised what might have been a walkie-talkie to his mouth and began to silently yell into it. Then the screen became a confusion of white fog and moving bodies as it changed to show another bathroom filled with confusion. I gasped and air filled my lungs.

I heard echoes of the distant fighting coming up the hallway and through the double doors behind me. The sounds made a strange accompaniment to the disjointed scenes playing across the monitors. The displays showing the work areas pictured the teams of soldiers and mutant canines moving with calm precision as they advanced toward and into the restroom doorways, firing their weapons as they entered. In contrast, the interiors of the restrooms were scenes of utter chaos. Laser blasts like pencil-thin strands of pure white flickered across the screens, impacting the bodies of those within who were trying to take cover and retaliate at the same time. Return fire consisting of lasers, projectiles and magical energy flew in showers across the screens as Hell's Fist tried to overcome the ambush. Smoke obscured the air, and twisted and crumpled bodies could be seen laying on the restroom floors.

Overall, the firefight lasted for just over five minutes, though it seemed much longer to me. Two of the terrorist teams were able to overcome the initial assault and make it out of the bathrooms. One ran into a withering hail of gunfire as soon as they exited. None of them made it farther than five feet from the door. The other group was able to make its bloody way out onto the production floor under a haze of magical darkness. The army officer in charge of the soldiers in that area quickly rallied his remaining men and ordered them to throw a volley of hand grenades from their positions against the wall into the heart of the darkness. The shrapnel killed the mage who'd cast the spell, causing the magical darkness to collapse. The remaining attackers, many also wounded by the grenades, were cut down after that.

For the rest of the members of Hell's Fist, the mangled interior walls of the bathrooms were the last thing they would see in this lifetime. One

squad, the one led by the Commander himself, used some type of cube-explosive to blow themselves up when it became obvious they were in a deathtrap. The blast was powerful enough that it shook the conference room I was in and completely vaporized both the members of Hell's Fist and the squad they'd been fighting against.

When the gunfire finally ceased, not a single member of Hell's Fist remained. An officer standing near the monitors lifted his hand to his ear as he listened to his headset for a few moments. Smiling, he turned to the citizens and soldiers at the table as all attention in the room focused on him. "Some of the bodies were vaporized during the fight, but we believe that all sixty-two terrorists observed entering the factory have been accounted for. We got all of them," he declared.

Cheers went up in the conference room as people celebrated the victory. Tom and Captain Richmond were the center of attention as their hands were shaken again and again. Somewhere a cork popped, and then champagne was being handed around to everyone. I backed into a corner of the conference room, practically hiding behind a potted plant, and thought about my future with Angela. We were finally safe.

* * *

It took me nearly four hours to make it out of the plant after that. The celebration in the conference room took a while to wind down. During it, Tom had found me in my corner and pulled me forward to be given my fair share of accolades. Then I'd been taken aside into a small office off the conference room by a pair of sober-faced ISS men and told in no uncertain terms what I was and was not allowed to say to anyone outside of the ISS or military command about my involvement in the affair. That little interview lasted over an hour until I could finally answer the questions they tested me with to their satisfaction.

Ms. Summer finally came to my rescue, breezing into the office where I was being kept and informing my current interrogator that I was vitally needed somewhere else. She took my arm and led me out without giving the sputtering officer a second glance. Steering me around groups of soldiers and clusters of management people, I was led to the front entryway. There I saw Tom standing by one of the exits, watching soldiers march out to the parking lot where hovering transports awaited them.

"Don't say anything," he said when he saw the look of relief on my face, "I thought they'd let you go a couple hours ago." He winked at Ms. Summer, who let go of me, and shook my hand. "Take next week off," he said. "You deserve it. Now get out of here!"

I walked out into the parking lot, gazing past the vehicles coming and going over Chi-Town to take in the clear blue sky beyond. The air seemed alive as I took a long, deep breath. Then, grinning, I headed for McCoy's.

Angela, Robert and Max were just setting up when I strode through the doorway. Without a word, I swept Angela up and kissed her long and hard.

"It's about time," she said when I finally let her up for air. She kept both arms on my shoulders, hands clasped behind my head as I set her down.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I said in mock seriousness.

"Eugene!" Max said walking up to us. "What's going on over at the plant, man? The place is busier than an ant hill that's been stomped on."

"You haven't seen it in the broadcasts?" I said.

"You don't know him," Robert laughed as he came up to us. "Max can barely turn on a light switch, much less something as complicated as a TV."

"Ah, shut up," Max said, taking a playful swing at his cousin. "I don't need to know how to turn things on, just how to knock 'em out!" The two mock sparred for a moment before laughing. I took advantage of the distraction to give Angela another quick kiss.

"So what happened?" said Max, looking at me.

I gave him a very brief rundown of the attack on the plant and its outcome, mindful of the warnings I'd received from the ISS spooks. Max whistled when I was done.

"Man, what I wouldn't have done to have been there – would'a been nice to have gotten back at them for that friend of mine they killed last year when they hit that Firetown bank."

"So, how are you doing?" Angela said with hope in her voice.

"I'm doing great," I said. I turned toward Robert.

"Do you think I could borrow her for the evening?"

Robert put his hand on his chin and stared at us, frowning in mock concentration. "Okay, but make sure you get her home by a decent hour. And don't take her into any places of low repute!"

"Like a bar?" I grinned at him. Max and Robert both laughed.

"Let me get my coat," Angela said. She gave me another quick kiss before heading toward the back.

"So where are we going?" Angela asked, ducking underneath my arm as we emerged onto the sidewalk in front of McCoy's.

"First, I thought we'd head over to the market to pick up some groceries. Then I thought I'd cook us a celebration dinner. I may not be quite as good a cook as you, but I can make a pretty mean casserole when I put my mind to it."

"Sounds great to me," Angela said, with a hug.

The trip to the grocery store didn't take long, and we were soon on our way back to our apartment building, each of us carrying a box of foodstuffs under one arm with the other arm around each other's waist. The sun was glittering off the windows of Chi-Town as we strolled into our apartment building and got on one of the elevators.

Moments later, the elevator doors opened to our floor with a soft chime. We walked out, still arm in arm, gazing into each other's eyes. We'd only taken a few steps when I felt someone grab a fistful of the back of my jacket. Before I could react, I was lifted into the air and thrown against the wall between the elevators with brutal force. The box of groceries I'd been carrying broke into pieces beside me, spilling the contents across the floor.

Dazed and in pain I looked up to see Adger, the Dragonmage from Hell's Fist, standing between me and Angela. He was wearing the same dark maroon trench coat that he'd worn when I'd first met him, though there were now several laser holes burned in it. He looked ragged and tired and his left hand was missing. Hatred burned in his eyes. Angela stood with her back against the wall of the hallway, the spilled box of groceries she'd been carrying lying forgotten on the floor beside her. Her hands were balled into fists and fear battled with rage across her face.

I started to push myself up but froze as a second figure stepped through the doors of the second elevator. The Commander, dressed in dark body armor that showed several laser burns stopped, looking down at me. His eyes had dark rings under them, and his hand shook a little as he pointed at me.

"You have much to pay for, Mr. Becton" the Commander said. Still dazed from being thrown against the wall, I couldn't avoid the kick he slammed into my ribs. I curled up as the air was driven out of my lungs.

"Stop it!" Angela cried, trying to run to me. The Dragonmage pivoted and grabbed her by the throat. He raised her into the air as she struggled against his powerful grasp. The Commander laughed.

"Your girlfriend has spirit. Not much brains, though," he said, looking at where she struggled in the demonic grasp of the monster. Looking back at me, he sneered.

"You're pathetic. You're like all the other sheep here in the 'Burbs, following in the path the Coalition has laid out, never looking out at the world, never thinking for yourselves. Even when they kick you down," he emphasized his words with another kick to my ribs, "you still go crawling back to them." He drew a knife from a sheath at his belt. I could hear the high-pitched whine of the invisible energy field surrounding the blade. A Vibro-Knife capable of cutting through steel, my mind screamed at me even as I tried to fill my lungs with air.

"You know, it's really too bad I had to use up all my energy getting us out of that little trap you set for us back there. I'd much rather feel you squirm as I crushed you with my mind." The Commander brandished his knife and looked back and forth between Angela and me. "I guess we'll just have to do this the old fashioned way. It's probably for the best; we really shouldn't stay here too long." He walked toward where Adger,

who was leering at me evilly, was still holding Angela in the air. "I think I'll kill your girlfriend first, just so you can watch."

Angela dangled from the Dragonmage's grasp, watching the Commander's approach. She looked at me, trying to say something, but it barely came out as a whisper. I forced myself onto my hands and knees. I had to stop him, had to save Angela. It was my fault she was going to die!

Just as the Commander stepped in front of Angela, a white mist seemed to pour out of her body. Gleaming and translucent, it quickly began to wrap around her. The Dragonmage and the Commander stood dumbstruck in surprise as the mist formed itself into the shape of medieval-looking armor, completely encasing her. Then Angela kicked out with her foot. She connected with the Commander's hand that held the Vibro-Knife, sending it spinning through the air back toward the elevators.

Angela's attack sent the rest of us into action. The Dragonmage turned and hurled her down the corridor as the Commander dove for the Vibro-Knife, but I was lunging for it too. My hands came down on the back of his a microsecond after he grasped the handle of the knife.

Snarling like a wounded animal, the Commander rolled across the floor trying to break my grasp. I scrambled forward, using my legs to propel me as I grasped at his wrists. We came to a sudden stop as he hit the wall, me lying half on top of him. I took a quick glance to see what was happening with Angela.

Standing halfway down the corridor she was staring at Adger, protected in her insubstantial-looking armor. With a roar, the Dragonmage drew back his hand and cast a lightning bolt. It impacted against her armor without noticeable damage. She yelled something in a language that I didn't understand, and fire shot from her outstretched hands and smashed into the chest of the Dragonmage. I looked away from the heat, back at the Vibro-Knife in the Commander's hands.

He tightened his grip, knuckles popping, and began twisting the blade towards me. My left hand was wrapped around his right wrist and my right hand pushed down on the tip of the handle guard mere fractions away from the cutting field. The knife was nearly vertical, balanced between our faces with the point aimed directly between my eyes. We struggled with each other, straining to gain leverage.

The Commander's face was twisted into a mask of inhuman rage as he struggled with me. His knee came up into my ribs where he'd kicked me. The pain made me gasp and almost lose my grip on his hands. I realized that he was a veteran fighter while I was not. Also, even clearly exhausted, he was much stronger than me.

He slowly started pushing the knife toward my face. As the tip edged closer, I saw that I would have to choose between either having my face impaled or pulling away, giving him the chance to get out from under me. I could feel him tensing to land another knee in my ribs. I knew that I could not win. Then an idea flashed through my mind and action was simultaneous with thought.

I spit in his eyes.

The Commander jerked in surprise and his hands flinched toward his own face. In that instant, I shifted my right hand, gripped the handle guard and pivoted the knife handle in a half circle between the palms of his hands. The knife point scraped the edge of his breastplate as it moved, and I pressed down on it with all of my strength. The energy field that surrounded the blade sizzled as it penetrated the base of his throat. The enraged grimace on his face changed to a look of shock as the knife point drove through the bones in the back of his neck and dug into the floor beneath.

Beneath me, the Commander's body relaxed as his hands went slack and fell limply to the floor. Only his face stayed rigid as he stared up at me. He tried to say something but only a bloody froth bubbled out. Then the light slowly went out in his eyes.

I took a deep breath and sat up, staring at the man I'd killed. The knife sticking upright from the Commander's throat looked grotesque. I sat staring at it until a thunderclap shook the walls around me.

The dreadful duel between the Adger and Angela had continued unabated as the Commander had died. The Dragonmage's garments were smoking now, and I could see fresh burns on his face and chest. Despite the shape he was in, he continued to fight with feral intensity.

Further down the hall, Angela still stood, but her armor had lost its luster and the carpet underneath her was smoldering. Her face was strained as she started to raise both hands.

A series of energy bolts shot from the hand of the Dragonmage, impacting Angela's armor and driving her to one knee. Her face was grim as she struggled to rise. Looking back at the corpse on the floor next to me, I yanked the knife from his throat and pulled myself upright.

The Dragonmage was advancing on Angela. A ball of glowing energy hovered above his outstretched palm, and bolts of energy flew from it to slam into her battered armor. A cruel smile lit his face as he approached her. "Now, little human, you will die."

Walking as carefully as I could, I snuck up behind Adger, raising the Vibro-Knife high above my head. "Hey, ugly," I yelled when I was right behind him. He spun around and I drove the point of the knife into his face, right below his left eye. At the same moment, a bolt of energy crackled out of the ball in his hand, hitting my right leg just below the knee. Pain tore through me as we both fell. I don't remember hitting the floor.

* * *

I opened my eyes to see a room with white walls and ceiling. Chairs were drawn up along one side of the room, though no one sat in them. An open door in the corner opposite me seemed to lead out into a corridor where people were moving. I closed my eyes and then opened them again and looked down at myself. I was lying propped semi-reclined in a bed, a white blanket covering me from midchest down. I brought my hands up to rub my face and felt a pinch on the back of one of them. I looked to see an I.V. line taped to the back of my hand, a bright steel needle leading from the plastic tube under my skin.

I sat up a little and took stock of myself more closely. My shoulders were sore but otherwise fine. My ribs ached as I twisted slightly. I looked at the blanket that covered my lower body and flexed my legs and feet. My left leg responded normally. I could feel my toenails scrape against the weave of the blanket, but there was no matching sensation from my right foot. I looked closer at my leg and suddenly realized what my eyes had been seeing but my mind had not acknowledged.

The blanket over my left leg rose to a small peak where it covered my left foot. On my right leg, however, it lay flat against the mattress from knee level down.

Numb, I let my arms drop as I fell back against the bed. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Impressions from the fight in the hallway washed over me. The look of horror in the Commander's eyes as he lay dying under me. The knife sticking up out of his throat. The smell of burning carpeting. The sound of thunder echoing off concrete walls. Angela, on her knees as bolts of energy slammed into her.

"Angela!" I yelled, bolting upright in my bed.

"Mmmm... Eugene," a sleepy voice came from the floor beside my bed. I twisted to see Angela looking up at me, lying beneath a green blanket on a low cot. My heart felt like it would burst inside of me.

"Hi," she murmured.

"Hi," I choked. I'd never been so happy.

Angela sat up, knelt on the cot and hugged me. A voice in the back of my mind told me there were some pretty important questions that I needed to ask her, but I ignored it. At that moment, it was enough that she was there with me. I wrapped my arms around her and vowed to myself that I would never let her go.

That afternoon, I sat propped up in the bed with Angela sitting on the edge beside me, holding my hand as the Cyber-Doc explained how the cybernetic leg and foot he was holding worked. When the blast from the Dragonmage's energy ball had hit me, it vaporized everything from an inch below my knee down and damaged the joint beyond repair. While I'd been out over the past two days, surgeons had repaired what damage they could then fitted me with a new, cybernetic knee joint. This new limb was the latest model prosthesis, light and durable. It ran on long-lasting nuclear batteries and was fully capable of replacing my flesh and blood one with a minimum of hassle and maintenance.

The Cyber-Doc, finished with his lecture, pulled back the blanket on my bed with a flourish, exposing the metal fitting of my new knee. He fit the new leg to the socket with a quick turn and a push, accompanied by several clicks. He plugged in a few wires, tightened some screws and stood back to admire his work.

"Wiggle your toes for me," he commanded. I did so, watching the metallic cylinders flex around. "And now your ankle." I rotated my foot in wide circles. "And last, but not least, the knee," he said. I bent my knee, drawing my new foot up until it was flat on the bed then straightened my leg out again. "Looks good," the doctor said with a satisfied smile. "Take good care of it and make sure you lubricate the joints once a month," he said, packing up his tools. "And don't step on the lady's foot when you go out dancing."

Angela and I smiled at each other.

"Thank you, Doctor," I said.

"You're welcome, Mr. Becton. We'll do some tests with you later today. If everything looks good, you'll be moved to the rehabilitation wing. A few days there and you'll be ready to go home." He made a notation on the minicomputer on his clipboard, glancing at the clock on the wall as he did so. "I understand that there are going to be some investigators from the ISS coming in to talk with you both later this afternoon. They're very anxious to question you about the incident that put you in here." A look of concern passed across Angela's face as the doctor continued. "I thought it best to get the outfitting done first and give you some time to get your strength back before they start to pick your brains, however. They should be here shortly though. Have a good day now," the doctor said as he turned toward the doorway. A thought occurred to me just as he was exiting.

"Excuse me, Doctor, but who's paying for all of this?" I called after him, but he didn't hear me. I sat back in the bed, the sudden thought of being in debt for the rest of my life taking the air out of me like a pin pushed into a balloon.

"Don't worry, it's being taken out of the reward money," Angela told me, brushing her fingers across my cheek.

I looked at her in puzzlement. "Reward money?"

"Yeah, for giving information to the ISS that led to the destruction of Hell's Fist. The reward for the whole group was over two million credits."

I stared at her in dumbstruck amazement. Two million credits!

"Kinda nice to find out you're rich, huh?" Angela said with a merry little twinkle in her voice. I could only nod in mute agreement. She snuggled up to me as I lay back against the raised portion of my bed.

"Yeah," I finally said as I drew her in close under my arm. "Nice." I was rich in more ways than one, I thought to myself.

"How does it feel?" Angela asked after a few moments, the look of concern back on her face as she looked at the silver and black metal leg that was now a part of me. She had gathered her hair into a frizzy ponytail again. I could see the bruises that circled her neck forming the fingers of an enormous hand, but they were beginning to fade.

"Not too bad, I guess," I said, wiggling the mechanical toes again. "I don't think I'll be winning any races anytime soon. On the bright side, I only have to pay half as much for shoes now."

Angela laughed, hugging me then resting her head on my shoulder. Her hair smelled like peaches.

"My love," I said. I could feel her smile against the base of my neck.

"Mmm, I like it when you say that," she said, squeezing me tighter.

"My love," I said, shifting until she loosened her grip enough to look up at me.

"During the fight in the hallway, I saw some things I don't understand." I felt her body go rigid beside me. She tried to pull away, but I wouldn't let her. Finally, she nestled back onto my shoulder not saying anything. After a few moments, I shifted around again until she looked at me.

"No matter what, it's okay," I said, looking deep into her eyes. She looked at me in a silent plea, but I needed to know. "Please, tell me."

With a sigh she nestled back into the crook of my shoulder.

"My family's not normal," she said after a few moments. "We have a history, a... a tradition that most people don't understand."

A nurse, face flushed with excitement burst into the room at that moment.

"I don't believe it! You won't believe it!" she gushed as she rushed about the room straightening up. Angela's cot was folded and shoved into a closet in a whirl of activity. The nurse grabbed an empty steel bedpan, looked around for a few moments and then threw it into the closet with the cot and slammed the door.

Angela sat up straighter, and we looked at each other in puzzlement. "What's going on?" I asked the nurse as she straightened the blanket on my bed and started tucking the corners under the mattress.

"You must be really important for *him* to be visiting," she said in breathless excitement. "He's never been down to this level before. This is so exciting." Done with the bed, she straightened and looked around the room with satisfaction. I started to ask a question, but she seemed to think of something and dashed out before I could speak.

Angela and I looked at each other in confusion. We heard the bell of the elevator ding and then the heavy tramp of armored feet walking in unison. I heard a high, nasal voice saying in an obsequious tone, "You do us a great honor visiting our humble facility, sir." An urbane voice answered, but I couldn't make out the words. Then two Coalition soldiers in gleaming black armor came into the room, taking positions on each side of the door and saluting. I felt Angela stiffen a bit beside me, and I looked at her. Her eyes were riveted to the door.

I turned back in time to see a young man with dark brown hair, wearing the black uniform of a Coalition army officer walk into the room. I recognized his face immediately. Joseph Prosek II, first son of the Emperor and heir apparent to the throne of the Coalition States, stood at the foot of my bed.

"Mr. Becton and Miss McCoy, I presume," he said with a warm smile. Angela nodded her head in short, jerky movements as I stared in slack-jawed amazement.

Walking around the side of my bed to take my hand, he said, "I've come to thank you on behalf of the Coalition States for all that you have done for her and her people. Your bravery and sacrifice will not be forgotten." He looked between the two of us with a grin as an aide approached the end of the bed carrying a small, felt covered case. Opening the case, Joseph took out a round medal suspended from a short, white ribbon.

"May I call you Eugene?"

I snapped my mouth shut and nodded, unable to speak.

"Eugene," he said with satisfaction, "On behalf of my father, Emperor Karl Prosek, Supreme Commander of the Coalition Armed Forces and Emperor of the Coalition States, I hereby award you the Emperor's Medal, the highest award that can be bestowed on anyone who is not a member of the armed forces." He bent and pinned the medal to my pillow, then straightened and brought his hand up in a salute. The soldiers by the door and the aide at the foot of the bed also saluted. Joseph brought his hand down, smiled and took my hand again. "Congratulations."

"Th-thank you, sir," I stammered, overwhelmed at the honor. I looked at Angela. There were tears rolling down her cheeks as she beamed at me.

Joseph released my hand and moved to the end of the bed. Taking the case from his aide, he bent and spoke with the man for a few moments. The aide nodded, turned, and with a gesture, ushered the guards out the door. With a smile back at us, the aide closed the door on his way out.

"I hope you don't mind, but I thought I'd like to speak with the two of you alone for a few moments," he said, turning to us. He took a chair from beside the wall and brought it to the bed. He gestured towards the chair as if asking permission to sit. I nodded and he sat down, laying the case for my medal on the nightstand beside my bed. He sighed and rubbed his eyes.

"I've been on my feet all day, going from one ceremony to the next. It's nice to get a chance to sit and relax for a few moments."

Angela and I just sat there and stared at him. I know that I for one could not think of anything to say.

"You've been treated well?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, yes, everything has been very nice," I said, finding my voice at last.

"Good, I'm glad."

He scrutinized us for a few moments then turned his attention to Angela.

"And you Miss McCoy?"

"I'm fine, thank you for asking, sir," she said.

"I see that you were injured in the attack as well," he said, gesturing toward the bruises on her neck. Angela reached up self-consciously to rub at them.

"Nothing as bad as Eugene," she said.

"Very true," Joseph said as his gaze became inscrutable. "You were able to survive the attack with miraculous luck. You are a very fortunate young lady. Both of you are, actually. Most people never get a chance to walk away from their first encounter with a magic wielding D-Bee. Tell me, Eugene, do you know much about history?"

"Wha... Um, I mean, no sir, I'm afraid not," I said. The sudden alteration of topic confused me.

"No, I didn't think so. Most people don't these days. I myself am fascinated by it, especially the history of the Coalition States and Chi-Town in particular. It's quite natural, I guess you could say, since one of these days I'll be the one responsible for them." He looked across my bed out the window for a few moments, seeming to gather his thoughts. Then he looked back at me.

"Would you believe that there was a time once, long ago, when there were magic-users who were a part of the Chi-Town community?" I stared at him. "Oh, yes, it's true, though you had better not mention it to anyone these days. But they were here. There were even a few who served in the armed forces, such as they were back then. The Coalition States didn't exist at the time, you see. No, Chi-Town was just one of several human enclaves that were trying to make their way in the world." His voice grew hard.

"That was before the Federation of Magic attacked and slaughtered so many innocent people. You won't find it in the official recordings, but those early magic users helped push back the attack and even helped my grandfather when he struck into the Magic Zone in an attempt to destroy the Federation. They were true patriots to the cause, out sacrificing their all for the betterment of mankind. But while they were off fighting a war, the people back home grew increasingly frightened of magic and the havoc it could create. Even before the war, the average citizen hadn't wanted anything to do with it. Afterward, they didn't want it anywhere near their community, even in their army. So when those heroes came home from the war, they came home to a people who didn't want them."

Joseph paused, leaned forward, and took a small, round medal from his pocket. It was silver colored with two opposing triangles stamped into it in such a way that their points reached out a little from the rounded edge. One of the triangles, the one that pointed down, looked like a stylized V. He began to fiddle with it, turning it over and over in his fingers. I felt Angela tighten her grip on my hand, though her face remained placid as Joseph continued.

"One of the problems with magic is that it's very hard to forget how to use it once you've learned its secrets. Especially if you don't see anything wrong with it. So you can see the challenge that those brave people faced upon their homecoming. They had never hurt anyone, but the public couldn't be reasoned with. It had been decided. Magic had no place in Chi-Town."

"The people who knew how to use magic were given a terrible choice. They could stay and be a part of Chi-Town if they underwent psychic brainwashing to make them forget what they knew about magic. Or they and their families could give up their citizenship and be exiled from Chi-Town forever. Not surprisingly, most chose to leave rather than be forced to forget what they had learned. They quietly gathered their families and possessions and left."

"When the last magic-user departed, the government records were altered to erase any trace of their existence. Time passed and people chose to forget. The entire organization was lost to history." He paused

in his narrative. "I sometimes wonder if those mages and their families ever chose to forget about us." He trailed off for a few moments looking out the window again.

"Have you ever heard the urban legends concerning the Vanguard, Eugene?" Joseph said, still staring out the window. The medallion in his hand flashed in the light.

The Vanguard? Of course I had heard of them. Stories about them were as common to the 'Burbs as rats. They were supposed to be a mythical group of mages who fought for the Coalition way of life, absurd as that might sound. Who in the 'Burbs hadn't heard of them?

I nodded my head. "I'm not much into legends though, sir," I said. Angela was squeezing my hand so hard by that point that it was beginning to go numb.

"Neither am I, usually. Most urban legends seem to be made up of cobwebs and bad fiction, if you ask me. But I've been told tales, some old and some quite recent, about human magicians who choose to fight the inhuman and monstrous instead of join with them. Some tales even whisper that these spell casters seek to uphold the Coalition States and all we stand for. According to the stories, it is these magic-users who are supposed to be this shadowy group everybody knows as the Vanguard," he said. He looked back at us with one eyebrow raised.

"Can you imagine, a bunch of sorcerers fighting for the Coalition?" He shook his head at the thought. "The idea seems preposterous. At least that's what I thought until I came across the records of the old Chi-Town mages and their exile. Now I wonder if there isn't some kernel of truth to the legends. I find myself speculating that the old magic-users, rather than abandoning Chi-Town in their exile, might have instead hid themselves and continued to protect her and her people. That leads to questions about their families – did they stay too? Perhaps, and as the original members of the group grew older they might then have passed on their knowledge and beliefs to their children and grandchildren. Why, they could have created a secret society just as the urban legends suggest. A group of patriots pledged to protect a society that would forever reject them. I've often wondered to myself just how I would go about contacting such an organization, if it ever really existed." He said this last part looking at Angela without a hint of a smile on his face. Her hand slackened in mine as she looked back at him, her expression unreadable.

A suspicion started to grow in my mind as several things began to click into place.

"But no matter," Joseph said. He straightened in his chair and put the medallion back in his pocket. "It's something fun to think about in quiet moments but nothing to be taken seriously, I'm sure. Forgive me for indulging myself with a captive audience." He looked at us and his warm smile returned. "Tell me, Eugene, if I'm not too bold to ask, what are your intentions with regard to the lovely Miss McCoy?"

I looked at him, thinking of all I had seen and been told. There were so many things that I still didn't know or understand. Then I looked at Angela. She sat on the bed beside me looking both strong and vulnerable at the same time.

I put my arm around her shoulders.

"I think I'd like to hold her for the rest of my life," I said, squeezing her to me. Her answering embrace was reassurance enough.

Joseph looked pleased as he stood. "I think I've taken enough of your time," he said, shaking our hands. "I wish you both the very best."

He walked to the door, but turned back with his hand on the knob. "Oh, one other thing. Unless either of you has an objection, I'm going to call off the investigation into the attack on you in your apartment building. After all, the two who tried to hurt you aren't going to be coming back again, right? No need to waste valuable resources digging any further into a closed matter, don't you think?"

"I couldn't agree more," Angela said with a grin.

* * *

So here I am on my final day in the rehabilitation wing of the hospital, packing my personal items into a small carry bag Angela loaned me.

A knock on the door of my room sends me stumbling over to it. My new leg is nice enough, but it is taking some getting used to. It's heavier than the one it replaced. Walking with it is like walking with a heavy snow boot on. Angela says I'll need to be careful not to put gouges in the floor at McCoy's.

I open the door to find the pasty-faced young officer from the Citizenry Board who'd rejected my citizenship application two weeks ago. He's standing in the hallway, both hands holding the handle of an expensive looking leather briefcase. Licking his lips, he introduces himself as if meeting me for the first time and asks if he can come in.

With mixed emotions, I step back. He looks around and then moves to take one of the seats at the small table set across the room from my bed. After a few moments, I sit in the other.

"Mr. Becton, I have the honor to extend to you the invitation to become a full citizen of the Coalition States with a permanent residence in Chi-Town." He opens his briefcase and pulls out an official looking document with a red wax stamp in the lower right hand corner. He extends it toward me with a greasy smile.

"My application for admittance was rejected for the final time two weeks ago," I say without reaching for the document.

The bureaucrat adopts a look of mild embarrassment like he'd just heard someone pass gas at a social dinner. "That was an unfortunate oversight, I'm afraid," he says, looking at the generic landscape picture hanging on the wall behind me. "Recent events have caused the Citizenry Board to reevaluate your application."

"I see," I say, taking the document from his hand. I look it over as he reaches into a pocket of his jacket to pull out a pen.

"Thank you for the offer, but I think I'll pass," I say, laying the document back into his open briefcase.

There is a moment of silence as my words hang in the air.

"Mr. Becton, you're being offered full citizenship in the Coalition States and an apartment on Level Twelve of Chi-Town!" he says. The look of shock on the young official's face makes his skin look even more like uncooked pastry. I shift on the hard, plastic seat of the hospital chair, trying to find a more comfortable position. "Level Twelve!" he reiterates as if I hadn't heard him.

I give up trying to find a comfortable position on the chair and stand up. I walk over to the bag holding my personal items, zip it up and hoist the carry strap over one shoulder. I turn to look at the official who is still sitting at the table. He's taken the citizenship document out of the briefcase and is holding it toward me like he's trying to give a dog a bone.

"It's all right," I say, smiling at him. "I think you made the right decision the first time. I don't really belong in Chi-Town." Without another word, I walk to the door and open it.

Behind me, the young bureaucrat is still sitting at the table sputtering, but I tune him out. Through the doorway in front of me is the same hall I've walked down a dozen times over the past few days, going to and from therapy. Today it looks different. Today it is the passageway to a whole world I've never encountered before.

I grin as I lift my new foot and step out into that world.

Author's Note: Everything in this story was based upon published **Rifts®** canon, though it itself is not. That includes Joseph Prosek II's visit near the end of the story (see **Rifts Adventure Sourcebook Four: The Vanguard**, pages 10-11, if you'd like more details).

Dedicated to:

My beautiful wife – If it weren't for you, Gwen, I wouldn't be chasing my dreams.

To Kevin and Wayne – For giving my imagination wings to soar upon and a place for it to come to rest.

And to Alex – The world is supported not by the flashy or the famous but on the shoulders of the steady and the dependable. We are all blessed to have you in our lives.

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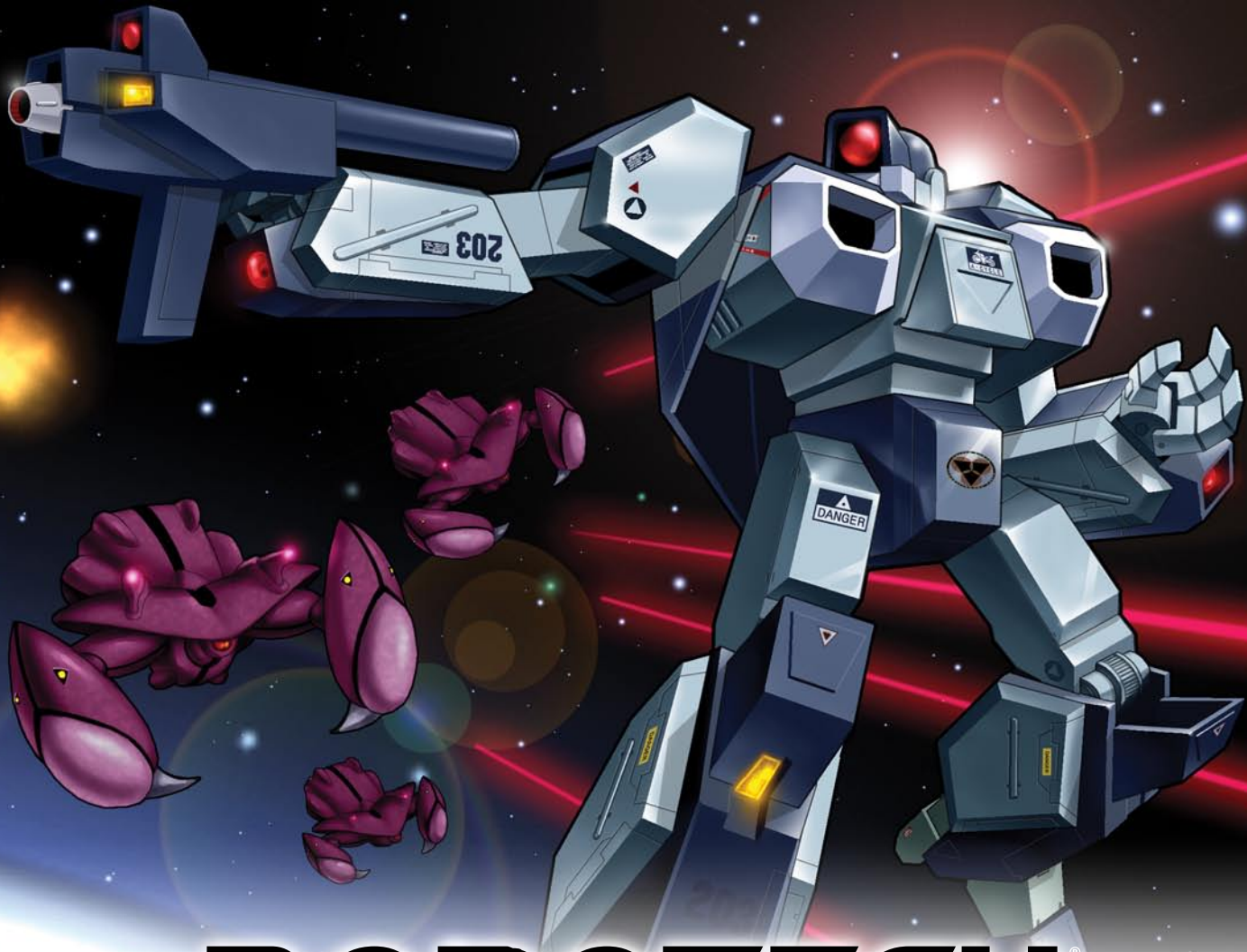
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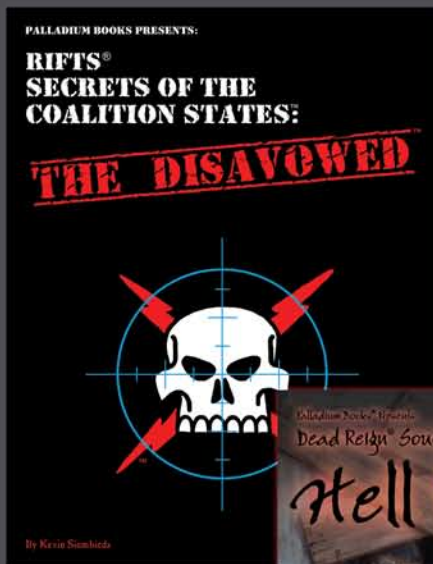
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