

F
FICTION

A CONFEDERATE CAJUN IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Sony-Louis Rollando

The desert sun beat hard from the west. In my right hand, I held an Ithaca SA-50. Not standard issue, but I prefer a little surprise. To my left, Gary surveyed the area with binoculars. He pocketed them, and pulled out an old pair, with glass lenses and no electronics.

"Looks like the zone caught up with us. Does it grow?"
"Could be. Full moon tonight."

I looked at my wristwatch — a mechanical one, for in the zones nothing else worked reliably. Above the watch was a wrist calculator. There are no mechanical analogs to that. I punched in $3 + 2$. It came up 7.12159. We were definitely in the zone. Half an hour ago, $3 + 2$ equalled 5. I sheathed my gun. At best, firearms in a zone don't work at all. At worse, the decreased burn rate builds pressure slowly and explodes the weapon.

We went back into the small cave. Gary slept three hours, and I kept watch. I saw one snake.

It was 2045. In the east, President Iroff had finally signed the Lee Treaty, though the war between the states had really been over with for nearly a decade. Not my problem anymore, though. Not since I moved to SoCal. I'd been with the Pendleton Franchise for 8 years, and the Confederate Army for three years before that, and was just beginning to have second thoughts about spending my life as a career soldier. Or ending my life as a body shield for whatever renegade tries to earn extra pesos hiring out to the Franchise.

No mages here, fortunately. Just a real mental jack who'd decided he could hide from the law in a technodead zone. Hell, he'd of been safer staying in San Diego. Even then, the law didn't give a damn about some minor murderer. All the wigs wanted was to make sure no one thought a dead zone was a free zone.

So here I was. Somewhere in the Anzo Borrego. I loosened up with the katana before handing the watch over to Gary. In three hours, we moved on. I've been meaning to ask a naturalist why there are no dead zones on a beach.

Two sleeps later, we found our first trace of him. At first we thought he was being clever, setting an obvious trail to lead any one following either astray or into a trap. So we move along real careful, like, for an hour. Turns out he's not clever, just an idiot. I heard a saying once about mad dogs and Englishmen. I've never met an Englishman, but this guy was a total cake. Swapped spit one too many times with the dragon. He's living in a fucking cabin in the center of a small, flat valley, sun baking the rocks like a natural microwave.

Still thinking this guy can't be that crazy, but wondering what it does take to systematically track down and kill only redheads whose names begin with G, I set up my bow. Adjusted the scope, a mechoid, of course, for the estimated distance, and waited underneath an overhang.

In the vids, this is where two soldiers always manage to solve their existential problems in a down-home, philosophical discussion. Fuck that. In the middle of the desert, it's hot, it's dry, the sun stares down like an ancient angry god, you don't feel like thinking, let alone talking.

So he comes out, probably to take a leak, the poor slob. One arrow and he's down, the next, he's good as dead. Gary looks on with the binoculars, and tells me when it looks like he's stopped breathing. We don't bother to

check the body until nightfall. It's not worth leaving the cool, and you never know — he may be faking it. From 300 feet it's hard to tell with old optics. But if he lays there in the sun all day, it won't matter what he's faking.

The moon rose before the sun disappeared. We came out of hiding, went into the little valley, checked the body. He's dead, no doubt. Peek inside the cabin, which is still holding in the day's heat, and there's nothing there. We left.

At the top of the valley's side, I turn around to take one last look at the sucker. And stop. The body was gone.

Shit. Like the old chummer used to say, just when things can't get any better, they gotta get worse.

Gary saw the same thing. He swore as well. It meant we were going to have to track the bastard, or whoever stole him, down. The hot day was fast becoming a cold night.

The calculator no longer worked at all. We climbed about fifty feet higher than we were, and surveyed the area. The full moon lit the desert almost as well as the sun, but our binoculars showed no one nearby — no person, no animal larger than a lizard, the only sign of humanity the fruitcake's cabin.

The door swings in the breeze, but I don't feel anything up here. The air has that humid, kind of damp, fleshy feel. You've never been in heat until you've been in Louisiana in August. Or the Yucatan, I suppose, in whatever passes for boiling there. Or even West Africa, from what I've heard. But I believe I'm babbling.

And I was. But momma set me right. She always did, that silvery smile, bright red hair. But that was the neighbor-girl-next-door. Daddy came in from the wars and set his briefcase down, but I couldn't see him over the din of the trivideo set. It wasn't for nothing they called us inseparable, my sister and eye. Red blood in my I, and a song in my heart.

Obviously, something was wrong. Far wrong and way cool. I thought I heard thunder in the distance, but it was Gary slapping me back to reality. Which wasn't an easy trip with the whore-whore-horehounds blowin' in the wind. I steeled myself against his mind, obviously the fruitcake's mind was still here in the dead zone, trying to infect us with his madness.

Or, perhaps not trying at all. Only a mindless life force, a shell, a lifeless mind trapped in the moon, to fade as the moon fades to nothingness.

I crouched, and saw the stars, and felt the ground again. Now there was a cold wind, and an odd smell in the air.

Gary kicked at someone. The kick should have sent his opponent tumbling over the edge. Instead, there was a slurping noise, and I saw his toes exit his opponent's back, straight through the liver. A hot smell exploded into the air, sun-boiled meat. Gary tried to hold back his nausea, and lost. It occurred to me that it was too bad he wasn't a redhead, then without thinking I drew my sword and hit whatever it was he'd kicked. I saw the thing's face, and it was the nut, and he was dead, but he clawed at me anyway. His mouth hung open, and his tongue lolled out one side of it.

My sword had cut deep, and I yanked it out, as he clawed at me again. I rolled back, and realized why video adventurers always had a shield. Steaming water poured out the wound in its side. Gary pounded its back with his staff. It staggered forward, but kept its eyes on me as I swung the sword back and chopped off his head.

It staggered forward, still clawing, and I thought we were fucked, when it just stopped, swooned, and fell. I

could still feel the ripples of the life force in the air, but it had lost its power.

We didn't rest until we reached the horses the next morning.

LAW OF THE PACK

Keith Ammann

The gray October wind blew plastic wrappers up the street and some of the brown haze out of the air. The afternoon sky was thick with clouds. The street was empty of people except for a thin, white-haired young man wearing a respirator mask and a goblin in a tan trenchcoat and spiked dog collar. As the thin youth covered his motorcycle with a plastic sheet, the goblin stared at the sky.

"So much for today's job-hunt," said the goblin, spitting on the ground.

"Yeah, Arch, like we were goin' anywhere anyway." The young man lifted up his respirator and wrinkled his nose. "Man. This rain better wash some o' the smog down." The two moved into a nearby doorway and sat down on the steps. Thunder rumbled quietly to the west.

"I don't know why you're hangin' around with me, man," said the goblin. "You're the one with the diploma. You could be out doin' somethin'."

The human shook his head. "The corps ain't for me, Archie. I can't live like that. You gotta give yourself away, man. They don't let you have your own life anymore. I'd rather stay on the streets."

"Man, Corin, you always was the spooky one."

Neither one said anything for a while.

"How's your dad?" asked Corin.

"Better. He's finally gettin' the people organized. They're gonna have some kind of rally." Archie kicked his heel against the concrete steps. "I'm really glad he finally got that promotion. 'Bout time they got an ork foreman down there. Might make some real money now."

"You think of applyin' down there?"

"Naw, man. Not on the line."

"Why not?"

"Because..." Archie thought for a minute, resting his chin on his hand and rubbing his enlarged lower teeth with his thumb. "Because I wanna be someone. Because I want a real job and a real life. I don't want people lookin' at me like I'm just another dumb ork with nothin' but muscle and attitude. That drek chokes, man."

Corin looked down, then at Archie. "They gonna think that anyway."

Archie sighed. "I know. But down on the line, people fight you to prove it. Too much hate there for me, man. I don't wanna get into all that."

"I know what you mean," Corin said. "But you gotta get somethin' sometime."

"Yeah." Archie hadn't had a job since he'd left high school. He hadn't even gone for an interview since the disaster a year before, when he applied for a counter job at the neighborhood Stuffer Shack convenience store, hoping that he could eventually make it to manager. Since that interview, he'd always found excuses not to go to any others, fearing the rejection he was sure he'd receive.

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"Name?"

"Archie Santangelo."

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"Education?"

"Two years at Jarman High."

"Only two?"

Archie hadn't thought it would be the right thing to say that he'd been expelled his junior year for trying to stop a fight between two normals. The security guard, seeing Archie shove the larger of the two hard against a locker, assumed he had started the fight. For some reason, the dean didn't think it was strange that a B student with a clean disciplinary record would assault two other kids at once. "That's right," Archie said.

"Program?"

"College prep."

"Not vocational?"

The dogs in Archie's head woke up. His voice took a hard edge.

"No, not vocational. College prep."

The interviewer noticed the change in tone and looked up coldly.

Archie had made his first mistake. "What previous experience do you have?"

"None yet."

"None yet," repeated the interviewer, as if he had guessed the answer beforehand and just been proven correct. "What made you want to work at Stuffer Shack?"

"It's near home," Archie replied as Corin had coached him. "I don't have a car. I can work night shifts. I know how the stores are organized. I'm not afraid of being robbed."

The interviewer smirked. "Do you know what to do in case of a robbery?"

"Don't resist. Get a good look at the robber so you can describe him later. Give him what he wants. Hit the Panicbutton as soon as he leaves."

The interviewer scowled. He'd expected the ork to say something like, "Jump the counter, maul the fragger, and give what's left to the cops." Somehow he didn't like the fact that Archie knew the right answer. He looked up. "Why the dog collar?"

Second mistake. He'd forgotten to take it off before the interview.

"I just like it."

"Can't wear it on the job."

"I understand."

"We have strict dress codes. You wear the uniform and the hat. No scruffy clothes, no street clothes. No dog collars."

"I understand."

"Good." The interviewer looked down again. "Any criminal record?"

"Nope."

"No assaults? No vandalism?"

"I said no."

"Ever stolen from an employer?"

"I told you, I've never been employed."

"You drink? Use drugs or chips?"

"I don't have a jack. And I don't use drugs." The dogs began to growl.

"But you do drink."

"Yeah, some."

"Ever drink on the job?"

Archie jumped up. "Goddamnit, I told you! I haven't had any other job yet!"

The interviewer looked up slowly, icily, and closed the folder.

Strike three. "Thank you, Mr. Santangelo. That will be all."

Archie looked open-mouthed at the interviewer. Gradually, disbelief was replaced by understanding. "You

never intended to hire me at all, you bastard. You were just stringin' me along. It's 'cause I'm an ork, isn't it?"

The interviewer said nothing.

"Isn't it?"

The interviewer pressed a button on his telecom. "Liz, please show the applicant out."

"You goddamn bastard." Archie shook his head and walked wearily out of the office, ignoring the girl in the doorway who stared at him vacantly. The barking of the dogs was giving him a headache.

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The clouds finally broke open. A drizzle of pale yellow rain began to fall, turning gradually into a steady shower. Archie backed further up the steps, pulling his long legs out of the rain's reach. The wind picked up. Corin zipped up his heavy black jacket.

"What time is it?" Corin asked.

"Why don't you get a watch?" said Archie.

"Can't afford one, dreckhead. What time is it?"

Archie looked. "Quarter after four."

"Guess we're stuck here for a while."

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The rain continued on into the early evening. When it finally stopped, Corin took a sniff, decided the air was safe to breathe again, and walked up the block toward his basement apartment. Archie went down the block to his own building.

His family was already seated around the dinner table when he got there. "Hurry, Archie, your food's getting cold," his mother called as he hung his long coat on a peg, picked up his two sisters' coats, and hung them up too. He sat down at the table between his father and his younger sister, Mary. The dinner was flavored nutrisoy, as usual. No specials tonight. He picked up his fork and started shoveling it in. His father was talking about the union; they were going to have a rally the next night. Archie made interested noises.

"Mommy, can I get a straw?" Mary asked.

"Certainly, honey." Archie's mother got up and went to the drawer that had the straws. She and his other sister, Anna, hadn't undergone the mutation that affected Mary, him, and their father, making their muscles denser and stronger, their frames taller, and their faces frightening parodies of normal humans' faces, with slightly pointed ears and overgrown lower canines that poked out between their lips. Archie and his younger sister had been born that way; their father, he was told, changed at puberty. He'd spent three weeks in the hospital, and come out more strong and stubborn than ever before. Anna, being fifteen years old, was considered beyond risk. She would probably stay human the rest of her life.

"Mom, why you gettin' Mary a straw?" Archie said. "She's gotta learn to drink from a glass some time."

"Archie, don't be mean."

"I'm not bein' mean, Mom. Mean is gonna be the kids in high school askin' why she don't drink out of a glass like everyone else." Mrs. Santangelo put the straw in Mary's glass with a resigned look at Archie. Mary drank the soymilk. Archie shook his head and returned to his food.

"Find a job today, Archie?" asked his father.

Drek, thought Archie, having hoped that his father would talk about the union until dessert. "No, Pop. Got rained out."

"It wasn't raining this morning."

"I wasn't up this morning." Knots formed in Archie's stomach. His appetite fled. The dogs howled.

"Why weren't you up this morning?"

"Pop, I'll go out tomorrow."

"Answer me! Why weren't you up looking for a job this morning?"

"Michael, please." His mother's face had a pained expression.

"Paula, stay out o—"

"Pop, I'll go tomorr—"

"Don't shout—"

"You will get up out of—"

"Pop, I will—"

"Can I head over to Rachel's?" said Anna. Her soft, steady voice cut through the shouts. The argument lost what little continuity it had.

"Yes, dear, go ahead," said Mrs. Santangelo. Anna got up from the table and went for her coat. Archie and his father looked at each other once again.

"Archie, hon, if you're not doing anything tomorrow, could you pick Mary up from school?" asked his mother before the shouting could begin again. The front door opened and shut.

"He's not—"

"Yes, Mom," Archie said. His father scowled angrily. "Pop, I'll check the ads tomorrow morning."

Mr. Santangelo glared at Archie, pushed away from the table, and walked into the TV room.

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Archie got up early the next morning, mainly because his father woke him up. That day he browsed through the want ads on the newsfeed, made a couple of half-hearted phone calls, and didn't write down the information he got.

Early in the afternoon, he went out to find Corin. He was hanging around on the corner with Martin Megistus, the street magician. Martin was popular with all the kids, but only Corin had stayed interested in the old man's tricks as he grew up. He said the magician was the real thing, and he was learning the stuff himself. Martin had always told Archie he had the talent as well, but Archie could never stay interested. Most of the things the magician said went over his head. Any time he thought he understood something, the dogs would get restless, and he'd lose his concentration. Corin could focus his attention on something for hours at a time. Archie didn't care about things if he didn't understand them right away.

Corin, as usual, was completely wrapped up in what the magician had to say. Archie tried to look interested but couldn't. His efforts to get Corin's attention away from the magician came to nothing. His "Sayonara" as he left barely got a nod. He checked his watch. It was a little after two-fifteen. He headed off to pick up his sister.

Archie walked up the drive to the front door of Milton Elementary. He'd gone there too, when he was little. The lobby always looked really small compared to how he remembered it, no matter how many times he came back. Watercolor paintings from the art classes covered the fake-wood-paneled walls. Children milled noisily about. Parents bumbled through the crowd, calling out, trying to find the ones that were theirs. Carefully and gently Archie pushed his way over toward the auditorium doors, next to that weird metal thing that was supposedly a sculpture. It had been there forever. Corin had always been fascinated by the metal thing, with its small, intricate shapes and moving parts. Archie had never gotten the point. He craned his neck and scanned the lobby, looking for Mary.

When he spotted her, the dogs started barking in his head. She had been crying; there were dark circles under her eyes. A big black smudge of dirt covered one side of her new jacket. Her long, brown hair was messed up. Forgetting politeness, Archie plowed through the crowd toward his sister.

"Mary, tell me what happened."

"No." Her lip trembled.

"Who did this, Mary? Tell me who did this?"

"No." She shook her head.

"Dammit, Mary, what happened?"

"Nothing."

Archie felt ready to explode with frustration. "Come on. Let's get home." He took her hand and started walking, too fast, toward the door. As they walked out the door and down the drive, Archie's questions were answered. A group of human kids, standing at the bus stop, pointed and laughed. Archie stopped in his tracks and put a hand on Mary's shoulder. "Stay right here, Mary," he said. Mary stood as still as a fence post. Archie strode toward the bus stop kids.

"What're you starin' at?" he shouted. "What the hell you think you're starin' at?" Most of the children stopped laughing. One whispered, "I don't know, but it's u-ugly!" Another giggled at that.

"Who said that?" demanded Archie. The dogs strained at their leashes. "Who was it? Was it you?" he shouted into on child's face.

The child was petrified. Archie straightened up.

"That," he said with fierce restraint, "is my sister. You hear me? My sister. And if I find out that any of you little snots are messin' with her again, teasin' her, pushin' her around, callin' her one single fraggin' name that's not her own, then I hope you got the bus fare to get back from where I'm gonna kick your snotty little asses to. You got that? One word! One word and you're meat." The children stood frozen, speechless. Out of the corner of his eye, Archie saw a teacher walking over. He nodded to her and turned to walk back toward his sister. The teacher continued walking, approaching him. He gritted his teeth.

"Can I help you, sir?" the teacher asked accusingly.

Archie turned his head and gestured to his sister. "No, but maybe you could start helpin' her. 'Bout time someone did." He shut himself off from the teacher, took Mary by the hand, and walked her home without a word.

On the way home, his head was full of angry thoughts. He'd only been trying to look after his sister, and the teacher — the same one he'd had years before — had thought he was some sort of criminal. A chill wind picked up. The studs of his collar felt cold against his neck. Archie hung his head, ashamed of his outburst. He wondered if he could actually bring himself to do anything to those kids if they bothered Mary again. He wondered if he'd ever be able to live with himself if he did. His hand gripped Mary's tightly. The dogs remained awake, watching.

When Archie got home, Corin was waiting outside. "Sorry I wasn't—" He noticed Mary's condition and broke off. What happened? he mouthed.

Archie motioned Corin to come on in. He glanced at the elevator; broken again. It's not fair to make a ten-year-old kid walk up four flights, he thought. He carried Mary up the steps.

His mother told Mary to go change and wash up. "Mom," Archie started, "a bunch of kids were —"

"It's okay, Archie. She's fine. She just needs to get straightened up."

"Mom, she's not fine. The kids are knockin' her around. You gotta talk to the teachers there."

"She'll be fine, Archie. She's not hurt. Just a little dirty."

"What if she gets hurt?"

"Archie, don't worry. Everything will be okay." Mrs. Santangelo turned and followed Mary.

Archie swung his fist at the air. "Nothing. Not a damn thing I can do."

"C'mon, Arch. 'Sko over to my place." Corin motioned Archie to leave.

They went out the door. Anna was coming up the stairs. "Hoi, Anna," said Archie. Corin waved. She smiled at the two and turned into the apartment without a word.

Corin walked down the stairs. Archie stomped. "I can't take this anymore," Archie said. "Kids pickin' on Mary. Guys at work givin' Pop the screws. Pop givin' me hell for not bein' perfect. Day after day with nothin' to do. I can't take it."

"Get a job."

"Slot off, man, I'm serious. I am goin' absolutely nuts. I live on a street with squatters, chipheads, people with dead-end jobs and unemployed bums like us. And there's not a fraggin' thing I can do about it! I can't even get a fraggin' job—"

"You tried lately?"

"That's not the fraggin' point!" snapped Archie as they walked out the door. "Even if I tried, I wouldn't get nothin'. They're keepin' me out. Don't want me. Don't want a fraggin' ork doin' somethin' they could get a normal do to. Don't want me nowhere but on the line or on the street, where I can't do nothin'. Christ, I gotta do somethin'!"

"What can't you do?"

"I can't change nothin'. I can't stop people from messin' with my own goddamn sister. I can't make people see what's goin' on. I start maulin' people, what does that do? Nothin'. I'm just what they want me to be then, see?"

Corin nodded quietly. "Yeah, I get it."

"I don't wanna hurt no one. I just can't stand to see all this drek goin' on around me. I gotta do somethin'. God, they won't even let me protect my own goddamn sister."

Corin gave Archie a moment to cool down. "Let's get somethin' to eat, man."

"Got no appetite," said Archie.

"You can buy mine, then."

Archie laughed. "You take me to Stuffer Shack, you're meat."

. . .

The dogs started barking later that evening. Archie couldn't shut them up. They drove him to distraction. As he and Corin approached his building, the barking became more and more insistent. Archie stared blankly at the building. In his mind, the dogs barked disaster. A dreadful intuition overcame his reason. He bolted away, up to the building and through the door, bounding up the steps two and three at a time, hitting the stairwell wall once as he lost his grip swinging around the rail. The dogs barked incessantly. He burst through the apartment door without turning the knob all the way, nearly ripping the bolt slot from the frame.

His mother sat on the couch, holding Mary. The girl was crying in terror and grief, tears streaming down her face, gulping in air and expelling it in horrible wails of anguish. His mother sat still, her face pale, her eyes sunken, staring straight ahead, mechanically stroking the girl's hair. Anna sat on a chair in the dining room, tracing a finger around in circles on the table.

"What's wrong?" screamed Archie. "Someone fraggin' tell me what's wrong!" His shouting intensified the young girl's crying. His mother shrunk back against the sofa. Neither spoke.

The only answer came from the other room. "The Humanis Polliclub crashed Pop's union rally," said Anna in a melancholy monotone, not looking in Archie's direction. "They came with baseball bats and shotguns. They said

they were there to punish the local that hired goblins as foremen." She paused. "They beat Pop to death."

The dogs were going crazy, barking, pulling at their leashes, jumping and cursing and yelping in every direction. Archie's head spun.

"They what? Who were they? Who did it?"

"The police broke it up," said Anna. "Pop was already dead. They arrested a bunch of them." Anna looked at Archie, a strange, puzzled expression on her face. "Mom won't press charges."

"WhaaAAAGGHHH!" Archie had meant to confront his mother, but instead of words came an inarticulate roar. His mother's face was devoid of emotion, almost devoid of life. She spoke like a ventriloquist's dummy, like the words weren't her own and she was only the medium. "I don't want any more trouble, Archie. I don't want any more trouble. Everything will be all right. It has to be. No more trouble."

In his anger, Archie brought both his forearms down on the end table, smashing it into jagged fragments. His mother closed her eyes tightly and shook her head. Mary wailed. Anna turned back to staring at the table. The dogs broke free, the pack charging off on the hunt. Archie, running, followed them out the door, leaping down the stairs. On the second flight he turned his ankle painfully as he landed, adding to his rage as he stubbornly and unevenly ran down the rest of the stairs and out into the street, screaming incoherently all the way.

Corin saw his friend tear out of the apartment building, yelling his guts out, loping along with a face that could give a mercenary a heart attack, and was struck dumb with shock. Archie never even saw Corin as he ran through the streets in agony, flailing his arms, barely maintaining his balance. The dogs had been loosed to the hunt. Hunting normals. Archie was part of the pack, being driven along with them. The pack would find their quarry, and Archie would join them as they chased and cornered and tore it to pieces. He charged down the streets with the pack, looking for the one that would pay for what normals had done to his family.

Suddenly something caught him and he wasn't running, he was falling.... His body slammed heavily against the pavement, his jaw scraped against asphalt. His hands were torn by gravel. He tried to get up but couldn't get his limbs to obey his commands. He was losing the chase. As he lay on the ground, screaming pleas to the darkness, the pack charged off and left him behind. He collapsed down and sobbed helplessly, unable to do anything.

Combat boots appeared next to Archie's head. Corin was kneeling down beside him, his face painted with nervousness and every limb shaking. "You go-g-gotta ch-chill, Arch," he stuttered out. "You g-gotta t-tell t-t-tell me wh-wha-what ha-what happened."

Archie's voice was choked with anguish. "They got away... The fraggers got away...."

"Who-who did?"

"They're gonna pay," sobbed Archie. "I'm gonna kill 'em... kill 'em all... every fraggin' one...."

"Archie, what are you talkin' ab-bout? You're n-n-n—" Corin scrunched his eyes shut and bit his lip. "You're... not... going to... kill anyone."

Archie's scream tore ruts through the street. "I KNOW!! They'll never let me... won't let me defend my own fraggin' family...."

Don't you see? All this goddamned drek... I can't do anything... they won't let me...."

"Archie, you can't kill anyone. You said it yourself. You can't become what they want you to be."

Archie exhaled a deep sob and dropped his head. His forehead hit the asphalt, jarring his senses. "I can't be anything," he breathed out. "I can't do anything. All I can do is lie here and take it." He paused. "All I can do is lie here. Corin, why can't I move my fraggin' arms?"

"My fault, man."

Archie suddenly felt free to move. He sat up dizzily. "What the hell'd you do?"

"Somethin' Martin taught me. Said your anger'd run away with you someday. Told me to do that if I ever saw it happen."

"Do what?"

"Never mind, man." Corin took a deep breath. "C'mon, let's get you cleaned up. You're a fraggin' mess."

"Gimme a sec. My head hurts." Archie lay back down, propping himself on his forearms. "I dunno what to do, man. I feel so fraggin' helpless. Muscle an' attitude's all I got. Can't use it without becomin' somethin' I can't stand to look at. Just another dumb goddamn ork."

"You got a lot more than that, Arch. You know what's right. Lots o' people can't see that. And you ain't afraid to stick up for it."

"Doesn't matter. Just a dumb fraggin' ork. Never be anything else. Not even good enough for the line...."

"Come on, man, your head works just fine. I can't stand stupid people, but I hang with you. You know what's right. You just gotta know how to make people listen."

Archie sighed. "I dunno. I just get so fraggin' confused... maybe if I just got somewhere where I could think...." Archie fell silent for a moment. He looked up at Corin, his eyes narrow. "You think they'd let me back into Jarman?"

Corin thought. "Doubt it. Maybe another school."

"Got no car."

"We'll figure somethin' out. Come on."

Corin steadied his friend's arm as he got to his feet. They walked and limped up the block. "Hey, Corin," Archie asked, "how come you got so many books? You won't buy a TV or a fraggin' watch, but you buy books?"

"You wanna read any of 'em, you're welcome to," Corin said, looking Archie and breaking into a small smile. "Knowledge is power."

Neither one said anything for a while.

"The more I think about it... the more it looks as if I've been a cog in one thing or another since the day I was born. Whenever I get set to do what I want to do, something a whole lot bigger than me comes along and shoves me back into place."

— Anonymous WWII soldier

TESS' DIARY

Wordman

[Writers Note: This is the summer diary of my character Tess, a grade 0 Snake shaman. She walks in a different world than most of us. Comments welcome at lward@flashpt.com]

«JUNE 3 / SEATTLE / VOICE MODE»

I have confusion. I thought the running of shadows was the Path. I no longer know. I'm not confident that setting my thoughts in this pseudo-permanent medium is a rational act, but Jana seemed to think so. My confusion is such that I will consider anything. (Anything? A dangerous thought, if true. Even my honesty eludes me.) There is too much black.

Maybe it is the mundane concerns. The current resolution with Aztechnology should be a break. But is it a resolution? Baal has left to avoid possible retribution; that seems prudent. I should leave, but is that the right thing? My dream of the wind through the sculpted walls seemed far.

Chicago. But the sneer...

«JUNE 4 / SEATTLE / VOICE MODE»

I have just played back my first entry. John says that the voice-to-text translator seems to work fine. If I am sure of anything, it is to take his word for technical matters. I can remember speaking more between some of the sentences from yesterday, but I must have just thought them. Interesting.

«JUNE 6 / SEATTLE / VOICE MODE»

Went back into Redmond to make my goodbyes (for how long?) to old friends. The first time I'd stepped onto Brain Eaters turf for years. I wasn't even in colors. Even though I've come to recognize lust in males, I've never fully understood it. Bruiser felt, not lust exactly, but something. I'd never noticed that before. He seemed concerned for my safety on my journey. I'm glad I told them I was going to Los Angeles.

Troxia has disappeared. She has apparently run off with a corper and moved to, coincidentally (?), Chicago. The Eaters are uneasy, but anything that gets her out of here should curb her chiplust. Voracious appetite for new input, but no will to go get it. She's a lot like me in some ways, had it not been for Snake.

The loss of the arm seems to have made Buck more philosophical. He said very little, but he and I always understood one another anyway. I'm sure he knew I'm really going to Chicago. He reached into a box and pulled out something I never thought I'd see again. The Collar. He kept it after he killed Marcus, apparently just in case he needed to make an object lesson. He said "It is the chain that you're dragging that was once your relief." (I wish I'd been looking at him from the Ethereal then. I'd swear for a brief moment that Dog spoke through him. More confusion.) He seemed a bit uneasy about how I'd react to The Collar.

It almost seems like that frightened, ignorant creature was a lifetime ago.

I'll be glad to get out of here tomorrow. This hotel room is beginning to depress me. Or is it the city? Too much black.

«JUNE 7 / CHICAGO / VOICE MODE»

Chicago airport is a zoo. I'm glad I was in a suit. I'm also glad I left the taser behind. Huh, imagine the look on the maid's face when she finds that in the sink. She's probably used to it.

The woman next to me on the plane was in simsense for the whole flight. She was an executive secretary. I examined cyberware very closely from astral for the first time. I never noticed how truly intricate the fusion between flesh and machine is. It was actually quite beautiful.

I begin to understand why cyberware, by its nature, makes healing so difficult. The patterns. So beautiful. I have not the words.

«JUNE 8 / CHICAGO / VOICE MODE»

Talked to a gentleman in a bar, discovered that he had just lost his wife. I watched him astrally while he drank and the alcohol seemed to improve his state. We talked for hours (I mostly listened) and he never asked my name. Just needed someone to talk to.

I bought a taser. Funny how something that would have landed me in jail at the airport can be bought without license from a sporting goods store.

Chicago's emotional state, in general, is a bit more negative than Seattle. The weather, perhaps. Maybe just the crowding. Or is it the Mafia? (Morte Alles Francia, Italia... something). Is it relevant?

«JUNE 9 / CHICAGO / VOICE MODE»

Been studying ancient Chinese all day. Some interesting texts from library.

«JUNE 11 / CHICAGO / VOICE MODE»

Stopped a rape. I was downtown, when I thought I saw Troxia. It turned out not to be her, but I followed her for a while. I noticed a man doing the same. His aura was a bit... twisted, so I mind probed him. Nauseating. He was so far gone, I don't think he noticed. I ambushed him with the taser and left him sprawling in the street. No one seemed to care.

Even so, I felt badly about sifting his thoughts. Every time I've done it before was in desperation. And the... subjects knew it was coming. I'm glad I decided against probing Cat's Eye while he slept that first night.

Today was the first spell I've cast in days. Now that my attention is focused on it, it feels like the mundane world is driving its hooks into me. I think now might be a good time for an astral tour of the city.

«JUNE 13 / CHICAGO / VOICE MODE»

Last night seemed to help.

I sought out Troxia this afternoon in earnest. I tried to learn the city by asking around the old fashioned way, but I had to resort to summoning a watcher. (They grow them a bit strange looking out here). Troxia and her significant other joined me for lunch. Doesn't seem like Troxia's type, but who am I to judge. Troxia told me later that it was all biz.

Dreamt of the sneering face again, but He wasn't sneering this time. He seems very familiar, but is that just part of the dream? Baal put digitized pictures of everyone we ran across into this gizmo, but His face is not any of them. Something about two small creeks crossing is there, but eludes me.

«JUNE 14 / CHICAGO / VOICE MODE»

Another dream of the Face. This time eating rattlesnake. Couldn't sleep after that. I am beginning to feel the Face is on my Path. As an obstacle, judging by the symbolism, yet it doesn't feel that way. I'm going to have to find this man.

Spent the day trying to buy peyote, in the hopes that it will make my dreams stronger. Very hard to get here, but found some. It is good to have a tangible direction.

«**JUNE 15 / CHICAGO / VOICE MODE**»

Dreams of the Face again; this time hiding something. The crossing streams are not creeks but rivers. I got the feeling of a mountain surrounded city. I'm going to Denver.

I ran into an artist on the El today, and he drew a likeness of the Face from my description. It is something at least.

«**JUNE 16 / DENVER / KEYPAD MODE**»

This city is beautiful! The sun was setting over the Rockies, just as the plane landed. Although legally I am supposed to be in the UCAS sector, I have a room in neutral downtown.

No dreams last night. I think I am getting closer.

«**JUNE 17 / DENVER / VOICE MODE**»

Downtown is set off at 45 degrees to the rest of the city, so I got a bit lost today. A huge Amerind corp-type pointed out that the mountains are always to the west. I should have thought of that.

Between bouts of scanning the screamsheets for the Face, I took an astral tour. This town almost pulses with deals. A very odd sensation. I saw a mage lose control of a fire elemental and paid close attention to its aura. The entity killed the mage, then flew off into the night, both of which I expected. Its aura/emotion when it killed its summoner was not the satisfaction of revenge that I'd expected. No desire, but no regret either, as if it was just something that it had to do. Very curious. When it flew away, however, the feeling of freedom it radiated almost consumed me. I noticed that, inside my pocket, my right hand was wrapped tightly around the Collar.

«**JUNE 18 / DENVER / VOICE MODE**»

Went to Confluence Park, where the Platte river meets Cherry Creek. Obviously not the rivers. I overheard a woman mention the Cherry Creek Mall. Just to be thorough, I took a quick peek. The mall was standard, but nearby was the Tattered Cover Book Store. Not just real paper books, but a whole building full. Clientele was almost all Awakened. The astral charge in the air was so thick, I wouldn't have been surprised if spirits started forming out of thin air.

«**JUNE 20 / DENVER / VOICE MODE**»

Havent made much progress on locating the Face, but haven't had the dreams either.

I did meet a decker named Ty, who is looking for work. Very interesting aura. Intricate beyond anything I've seen. For that reason, I think, I find myself very drawn towards the shadowrunner. I asked about the picture of Face and mentioned a price tag. We are now working out of a downtown apartment. I feel hopeful.

«**JUNE 22 / DENVER / VOICE MODE**»

The Face now has a name: Whittiker. He is part of the Pueblo Corporate Council. That makes sense to me for some reason.

Ty has been showing me around the Matrix. It gives me a horrible headache, but is very fascinating. I begin to understand the thrill John feels when fishing secrets from miles away.

«**JUNE 25 / DENVER / VOICE MODE**»

Whittiker is in the city of Pueblo, a hundred miles south. From a map I see that the Arkansas and Fountain Rivers merge there. Whittiker's position seems innocuous enough, but we are heading for Pueblo as soon as we make the arrangements. Ty knows a samurai there named Rojo.

«Keypad mode» As I was looking at Ty this morning, I caught a strange expression in my reflection in the window. It seems like I've seen that expression before on someone else. I'm beginning to get a bit confused over my feelings toward Ty (if only because I don't know what they are), but I must not let that confusion affect my Path.

«**JUNE 30 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE**»

I can't even remember how much of the information were finding I have put into this diary. I should go back to check, but I don't have time. Our discoveries are coming very quickly.

«**JULY 6 / PUEBLO / KEYPAD MODE**»

I've mixed emotions about last night. The experience was enlightening, to say the least, but now, as I write surrounded by satin sheets, I have doubts as to my goal. Yesterday I was sure that Whittiker's secrets were the reason I was drawn to this place, but after last night, I am beginning to question this.

I have never before experienced what Ty brought forth in me last night. The (I have trouble even writing it) ecstasy coursing through me was enough to send my soul out into its astral home; a reprise, almost, of my gang initiation. As then, I could see my meatbody below me, but it wasn't still. I could see it spasming under Ty's caress.

Even stranger, I could feel it.

Somehow I could still feel my body. Every touch. Every kiss. As if I had somehow bridged the tenuous gap between mind and body. More likely it was my partner's doing, although probably unintentional.

Even as she sleeps, Ty's aura is vibrant, especially where her skin touches her husband's. Lying on Ty's opposite side (which is curious, as when I went to sleep, he was asleep between us), Rojo is easier to figure out, but no less interesting. His aura pulses faintly (in time to his heart, I believe), a strong contrast to last night. An odd effect; parts of him completely black, while from the patches where he still has his original body, his aura seemed to explode. I think Snake is watching him.

Personal indulgence aside, this is what concerns me. Is Whittiker really on my Path? Or was I actually drawn here just to meet these two people? Ty and Rojo have certainly affected me. It is almost like Awakening again. But, no. It can't be; the guards on Whittiker's secrets are too strong for Snake and I to ignore. But... something.

Last night was significant, and not just because of the enlightening astral connection. Nor because I finally understand why humanity places such a strong emphasis on the pleasures of mating. Something else is there.

In spite of my growing doubts and nagging suspicions, Rojo, Ty and I are going to go through with the plan to infiltrate Whittiker's building. I must have answers. My mind tells me that I will find them there, but my spirit tells me that the answers (and perhaps the questions) will differ vastly from my expectations. Snake has remained annoyingly quiet. Although that has happened before, I am still frightened.

«**JULY 7 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE**»

«Input error. Impedance overload»

Aaaaannn. Fuck!

«Input error. Microphone spike»

Venom! This fucking hurts.

>You should stay quiet, Tess.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Too much black.

>You'll be fine Tess, just hang on.

«Nil translation» Ty?

>I'm here.

Important. Get sword to Jana. Seattle. «Nil translation»

>Who? What sword?
 Get that fucking thing away from me!
 >Easy, love, easy. Rojo, put the patch away.
 «Nil translation»
 >Tess! Tess!
 >>Is she...?
 >No. Just unconscious. She cast a healing spell on herself before we got there.
 >>Lets hope she held it long enough. I found her clothes.
 >The bleedings stopped.
 >>Christ. I'm going to go get... the...the rest of her.
 >Be careful. Are you all right?
 >>No. Not after this. What's that flashing?
 >What? Oh. Her secretary is recording.
 >>Turn it off.
 >Hurry back.
 «Interru

«**JULY 9 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE**»

As soon as we got in, I knew it was wrong. How fucking stupid could I be? It hurts so much. It feels like my arm is on fire, even though I know it's no longer there. If my intact eye wasn't swollen shut, I might cry.

I... I think Rojo blames himself, but it was my fault I got caught. I should have been paying more attention to where he was going. Rojo says Whittiker's gun fired explosive flechettes. Thank All that he didnt pull the trigger when.... The sick fuck. Who shoots someone bound in front of them?

Damn it. I'm bleeding again. Not that I can see it. Snake. I could heal myself, if only I could see.

Shit.

I think... I think it may be time to put myself in debt. I cant continue like this. The true sadness is that its all my fault. I misinterpreted something somewhere. I don't know. What did I do wrong?

«**JULY 11 / UNKNOWN / KEYPAD MODE**»

Interfactor seemed... tense, for lack of a better word, although that probably isn't possible. He (it?) managed to get me out here, wherever here is. I think I'm somewhere in Japan. Chiba would make sense, given the nature of my upcoming surgery.

The Surgeon (thats all I have heard him called) said that hed never seen wounds like mine before. I agreed, and given some of Baal's violence, that is not a small statement. I'm a bit glad I can't see my body in the real plane, cause its appearance is very distressing in the astral plane. The Surgeon informs me that a spread of six of the flechettes impacted around my right armpit, destroying my breast, some ribs and exploding my shoulder. Another cluster (or maybe two) spread down to my left hip, destroying my eye (I'm apparently lucky I don't have brain damage or a punctured lung) and bruising some bone.

My arm, according to the Surgeon will not accept a vat grown replacement, so he is cyber-replacing it. That didn't sound right to me, until I took a good look at my stump from astral. Something is preventing it. I have a feeling it is Snake, which is disconcerting. I'm told that normally they can install machinery which doesnt take away as much of my humanity, but that since they don't have the flesh of my real arm to work with, I have to settle for the normal stuff. The eye will be almost half organic, as will the sub-dermal plating that the Surgeon insists upon ("to reinforce your damaged skeletal structure.") Apparently, the problem with grafting real flesh to my arm does not exist for my breast, so thankfully they are simply growing me a new one.

I'd love to crawl around this place sometime. John would be very interested in their machines, I have a feeling.

I am not looking forward to surgery. The Surgeon assures me that everything will be fine, but I havent told him about the intensity of my dreams. The surgery itself doesn't scare me, but the idea of being chemically prohibited from waking up does.

If something should go wrong, my will can be found at SAN (0003)-09-2938 box 747. Passcode "Jormungandr".

«**JULY 29 / UNKNOWN / VOICE MODE**»

I almost forgot about this thingy.

The bandages are finally off. Yay! During the actual surgery, I apparently drove them crazy, as I kept plinking into a metabrain...um, blinking into a metaplane. None of the mages here have access to the metaplanes, so to them it seemed that my aura just vanished, even though my body was still showing vital signs.

Oooo. Pink!

Um... I did dream, but I don't remember . I looked at some of my EEGs. The docs said they were strange, but they just looked like squiggles. I'm told they tried an experimental simsense recorder on me in an attempt to record my dreams. I don't think it worked.

My meatbody looks great! I had thought there would be scarring. I keep breaking cups with my new hand, but I'm getting better. The injectors were Interfactor's idea. The eyes are amazing. They can see heat patterns and zoom in on far away objects. They can even cry. I cant feel the plating at all unless I probe with my fingers. My new breast is fine. It is now the same size as its opposite. I never realized how annoying that almost-invisible size difference bothered me until now.

«Input error: Nil translation. 67% probability of being laughter.»

Wow. I think these drugs are getting to me. I'd better stop talking before I say something silly.

«**AUGUST 2 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE**»

I just woke up here, even though I was in a hospital bed when I went to sleep. It was almost like a dream, but the light reflecting off my arm would seem to indicate otherwise. Damn, nothing quite like spending 800K for a month of surgery. I'm gonna get my bearings, then find Ty and Rojo. Then Snake and I have a long overdue appointment.

I've only been to Snakehome once before. Maybe twice. I don't really know what to expect. The first time, I was invited. Last time I was welcome. This time around I don't even know if I'll be allowed in. My power has diminished. I can't seem to make spells work without chanting in Chinese. That is most distressing. It seems like I should know something about the Path I got injured on... why it went wrong.

I don't have it.

«**AUGUST 3 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE**»

They're both dead. Rojo... he...

«Input error. Microphone spike»

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«**AUGUST 4 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE**»

The storage seemed to transfer O.K. Where did this temper come from? Looking back over this log... I don't know. I would never have tossed my pocket sec into a mirror three months ago. Very disturbing.

It feels like my world is falling apart. My magic is going. My friends are gone. Ty... O.K.... Ty got...killed. Black IC apparently. Running something in Denver. Rojo first found her. He killed himself. He... left....

«AUGUST 5 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

Words are harder now. I never told Rojo that I didn't hold him responsible for what happened to me. I can't help but feel....

What is wrong with me? I've lost people before. People I've known longer than Ty and Rojo put together. I... damn it. Calm.

Calm.

«AUGUST 6 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

Buried them today. I used to think that burials were to ensure the spirits of the dead rest. I think now that they're more for the living. Nothing makes you deal with death more than planting your friends in the ground.

Took a long walk. Beautiful weather, which I found depressing. It is becoming a bit clearer.

«AUGUST 7 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

I've been wandering in a haze for days. Time to stop. I understand love. I loved Ty and Rojo, although not in the way they loved each other. Bruiser loves me; we had the same look. It seems absurd that I didn't recognize that last time I saw him.

I've been putting off seeking Snake due to my grief. No. Due to fear. I go tonight. I go alone.

«AUGUST 8 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

It is so clear! I don't know why it took so long to realize. It... well... start at the beginning.

My quest began in a sweat filled room with only one door. This short, greasy, bald guy with a horrendous cigar entered from the other direction, blocking my path. He started to taunt me about losing my magic. I thought it was some sort of test, but he never made any sort of question or point. Looking back on it now, I can see that it was a test of separating the mundane irrelevancies from my magic. When he began to make dry comments on my sex life, I said "Does any of this matter?" He just looked at me. I told him to fuck off and pushed him out of the way. He didn't seem to mind, and I sure felt a lot more confident.

I thought I'd prepared myself for the sudden shifts in scenery so typical of the Metaplanes. I was wrong.

I found myself staring right into what I can only describe as the Source of Magic. Mana flowed out of a void, flooding the universe to infinity in every direction. It was enrapturing. After a long while (almost too long, I now realize), I noticed that the flow wasn't really fluid at all. More like individual streamlets. I noticed that one of the streamlets—maybe threads is a better word—seemed wrong somehow. I traced its path from the void and found that it passed just above me.

I remembered some bad hermetic theory that I'd read long ago. I'd always considered it garbage, but it seemed to work here. I experimented with the flow a bit. I made a wrong move and it charged through my body. It just left me tingling, but I think it could have been much worse. The stream seemed normal after that. I'd apparently fixed it.

Water rushed around my ankles, and I was naked in a sewer. Almost like growing up again, but I was already full grown and not afraid. I felt Snake just around the corner.

Realization struck just before I turned.

Snake was before me, but elusive to the eye. She seemed to radiate thoughts this time and never spoke. I knew that my damage and loss of magic had been a punishment, but that was now incidental, because I now knew *why* I had been punished.

I shouldn't have needed the hint, but the magic threads finally made sense. The thread was, of course, mine, but it

wasn't wrong, just misused; or... sorcery done correctly, but for the wrong reasons. I'd been questioning everything. Is this on my path, is that on my path? Stupid. The path will come to me, not vice versa.

Snake seemed to smile.

For the first time in Her presence, I felt confident. Even now, as I sit here alone, I understand that do not know where I am going. And as never before, knowing that I do not gives me great strength.

«AUGUST 10 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

I am still struck by the simplicity of Snake's lesson. I suppose all True things seem simple once they are understood. I talked to another of Snake's Chosen about the lesson today. He seemed to think that I should be upset about the permanency of it. I don't think he believed me when I said that I'd met Snake.

I don't think She chose him the same way She chose me.

Mentioning being chosen has reminded me of something Snake told me long ago. "You must not dwell on whether I think something is right or wrong. I have chosen *you*. *Your* decision will be the correct one." I should not have forgotten that.

A mage told me about a Sorcery lecture series given at the local college by some guest lecturer. A week ago, I would have worried about if going to this lecture was on my Path. It is somewhat liberating to have those thoughts vanish. The lectures have crossed my path, and sound interesting, so I will attend. The point is that I won't know if they are on the Path until they are finished.

Freedom is a road seldom traveled by the multitudes.

«AUGUST 11 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

This sorcery seminar looks most intriguing. The professor is not human. I mean literally not a *homo sapiens*. He calls himself Dion Kimber and is a City Spirit.

He passed out a syllabus (which looks a bit too hermetically oriented for my tastes) but chose to tell his own story instead of teaching sorcery for the first lecture. He apparently went free some years ago after his summoner died. A corporate wage mage; geeked during a shadowrun. He seems very interesting.

Only today have I noticed that I have cultivated Ty's more revealing style of dress. A subtle tribute perhaps? In this heat though, you need to dress skimpily. I actually wouldn't have noticed, but this early bloomer kept staring at my breasts during the lecture. Couldn't be more than fourteen years old. No skill, but lots of raw power. Coyote chosen, I think. The class is going to confuse the hell out of him.

«AUGUST 14 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

I had to leave class today, cause I started to weep over Ty. Irrational timing. After I calmed down, though, I felt really good. Made me realize that she really did mean that much.

The kid is in way over his head, which could be dangerous. He still continues to stare down my cleavage. I'm going to have to do something about that.

I'm finding only one idea in four from lecture new, and maybe one out of every three of those useful. I almost forget that most of these students (not to mention the teacher) haven't ever seen the Metaplanes. Most of them—how did Rojo put it?—"don't know dick" about astral space.

While shopping for my sorcery texts (mostly philosophy stuff), I found a book on enchanting. Hermetic, but I can relate to some of it. It's much more interesting than the sorcery texts, at least.

«AUGUST 16 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

I cornered the kid today and asked him why he found my breasts so fucking fascinating. He kind of fumbled and mumbled sheepishly, which was sorta cute.

I gave him a ride home, then invited myself in so I could convince him to look elsewhere for magical training. I mean, the kid's parents don't even know he's Awakened. I lay down the basics, especially the difference between shamanic and hermetic magic. That seemed really illuminating to him (as it did to me, all those years ago.) He asked me to tutor him for the summer. I refused.

I talked myself out and turned to go, but he stopped me and said "I find your breasts fascinating because I don't have them." I was a bit too stunned to respond, and so he, eyes looking at the floor, said "Can I see them?" I remember thinking only: and the Path will come to you. I took off my shirt.

«AUGUST 17 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

The kid (I never did learn his name) didn't show up in class today; a good sign. Hell do fine. Magically, he and I are a lot alike.

I've been thinking about yesterday, and I'm not so sure that I went away profitless. I'd never made love to another magician before. There were some odd astral ripples. We both noticed them, and I think he may have learned more about magic from them than he did from anything I told him. I gained a little something into how sorcery effects auras. In fact, now that I think about it, it makes one of the points of today's lecture very clear.

«AUGUST 20 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

Today I witnessed the joy of two parents in a park. Their child took her first steps, and was soon walking around the grass. For the first time that I can remember, I found myself thinking about my parents. Who were they? Why did they leave? It seems almost unnatural that I've not thought about it before.

«AUGUST 24 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

I had lunch with Professor Kimber this noon. He is a fascinating man. Spirit, rather. Some of his subtle movements are so human, it gets hard to tell. He seems such an average normal-guy, and then bam, he says the most brilliant thing you've ever heard.

I've been using this diary much less, recently. I think that's a good sign. Maybe I don't need it any more.

«SEPTEMBER 3 / SANTA FE / VOICE MODE»

I've been traveling around with Dion. We've been teaching each other in the most wondrous locations. I can see why the NAN make such a big deal of pollution. I'd kill to regain this land, too.

Dion has thought me a few new spells and I've gotten better at casting the ones I already know. Dion is actually a very artistic spirit. He's been encouraging my attempts at illusion sculpting. He's much better at it than I am. In return, I've been trying to teach him alchemy. It is going slowly. (I think spirits have a slower learning rate than humans. More repetitions seem necessary.)

It seems odd that I've become so intimate with an astral entity. A hundred years ago, I might have been burned at the stake. Nowadays it's simply unusual. Dion has been with other women before. Lots of women, if the seemingly limitless pool of ideas he suggests is any indication. His staying power is impressive.

I find his predilection for handcuffs interesting. He seems to relish the control. At first I thought it was just control over me, but I think it is really the idea that he is in control of a magician that pleases him. When he first

suggested the idea to me, I flat out refused; more ghosts from the past. Later I told him that I would if he'd tell me his truename. I expected him to freak, but he just looked at me and said "You can find that out yourself, cant you?" I said "Yes, I can." He thought about that for a second, then told me.

Being bound still doesn't appeal to me, but it gets him very excited, and that does appeal to me. Perhaps more than it should.

«SEPTEMBER 14 / TAOS / VOICE MODE»

Dion vanished three days ago. All my attempts to find him have failed. Either he has been banished or he doesn't want me to find him. In either case, I'm fairly certain that his truename was a lie. That surprised me, but it shouldn't have. I'm slipping a bit. This sounds heartless, but I don't miss him very much. I think we looked at each other as pleasant experimentation. I'm glad I never showed him the Collar.

I'm beginning to miss home a bit. If for no other reason than I knew how the city worked. I have about a week left before my visa expires, so I'm going to head over to Sedona.

«SEPTEMBER 15 / SEDONA / VOICE MODE»

This is one interesting place. On the one hand it is extraordinarily beautiful; the green against red against gray. On the other hand, it is filled with mundane magic-wannabees. I've never seen so many crystals in my life. You hear stories about the NAN lands, and how noble the Indians are, but I can't believe that the whites in this particular town were any worse than these people.

I was meditating up on a cliff, and one of these guys asks "May I join you?" I couldn't believe it. I was real tempted to blast the fucker off the mountain.

Hmmm. There is music playing from the next room that sounds familiar. Reminds me of sewers, for some reason.

Superchunk!

«Input error Impedance overload»

«SEPTEMBER 19 / PUEBLO / VOICE MODE»

I think my decision about where to go next has been made for me. I seem to be a bit low on funds. I hate that feeling. Anyway, I leave for Seattle tomorrow. It'll be good to see the troops again.

Maybe.

[Writers Note: Tess was killed two months after this entry.]

AMAZON TALES

Sony-Louis Rollando

When my dad lived in New Orleans, I used to sneak out to the docks. The docks were a real sight for a ten year old. A lot of men, drunken bastards, used to hang out there. Probably still do. There were always a few kids out there, and we'd always gang together, more for protection than any kind of friendship. There were always new faces, and always some old faces who just stopped coming down. I always figured their parents found out, and kept them away. Most of the docksiders were listless and gray, but there were some right mean bastards as well.

Only a few of the bums would talk to us, mostly old sailors, I think. We always knew where they were. One I remember real well was a gray-haired old guy we called Patch-Eye. Never knew his real name, though we knew the name of an old flame of his — he had her name tattooed beneath a picture of her on his right arm, though he'd never talk about her.

Patch-Eye could just as well have been Pegleg. I guess he was missing a lot of his body, and back then cyber just wasn't as common as it is now. I suppose cyber probably never did become as common in the Confederacy as it has here. I haven't been home for well over a decade now.

Anyway, Patch-Eye was still pretty good with his remaining eye. He could identify most any ship that came into the harbor, by name and origin, while it was still a sail, a smokestack, or an antennae array on the horizon. This was how most of his tales usually started.

"See that ship out there? That's the Marie Celeste III, bound from Amazonia. Probably loaded down with fruit and nuts, and not a few of them fetishes."

Few of us had ever seen any imported fruits. They were for people better than us. But most of us had been to a 'mamalao' at least once, and seen their bottles and wands. Fetishes from the small jungles of South America, on the Pacific, were in sharp demand by the local witches.

"I was down in South America many times," he said, "but only once in the Amazon. You kids've never seen anything like that."

Actually, us kids had never seen much other than old drunks, muddy marshes, and yellowed, dying plants. Maybe that's why we listened so intently to him.

"Yeah, it was the Jesus San Marcos, a huge clipper, sails like an ocean of their own. Captain Washman, he was the owner as well, he sold his house for that boat, and a better deal he never made. Last I heard, old Washout sailed it to Free Europe, or whatever they call themselves now, and was running the African coast.

"Yeah, we sailed the San Marcos to the mouth of the Amazon. The Captain'd hired out to bring back some hunters and their game. Me and the rest of the crew, we figured it'd be some monsters. The jungles have always been odd, but after the awakening, no place could outdo the jungles for wickedness. All the legends of the jungles came true — the Rahara of the Yanoama, the snake-lovers of the Warao, Yoin of the Kaingang."

Of course, none of us had been around during the awakening. We figured life before then must've been like life without electricity, or without computers.

"What are they? The Rahara is a snake, bigger than an anaconda. They can sleep for days, and even weeks, letting the jungle grow right over them. But let someone try to walk over it, and the head will whip around and swallow them whole, tearing up the jungle to do it. The Yoin is a huge, man-demon. It grabs people in the night — yes, even rats like you — and shoves a knife up your ass to rip out your heart and intestines. It eats them, I guess it thinks they're a delicacy.

"You know, I've heard rumors that one managed to sneak away on a trade ship, and there've been some strange deaths in the quarters recently. I'd be careful if I were you."

We didn't know enough to actually check the newspapers at the time, but I think he just made that up.

"So we were headed into this green hell to rendezvous with these guys, and bring their captures back to New Orleans. We anchored the San Marcos well into the Amazon basin, and the Captain, First Mate, and a couple of hands, including me, we got into a big barge and made our way upstream with poles and oars. It was hot work. There was no breeze, and it was as humid and hot as it ever gets here.

"We all had shotguns, and one guy, John... John Yarbrough, he had an English longbow, just in case we ran into trouble and the guns didn't work. They don't call 'em dead zones for nothing, you know, and back then they

weren't mapped out so well as today. Many a man's wound up dead thinking his rifle or cyber'll save him."

Of course, the same's true even today. Ten years ago the scientists made a big show about knowing exactly where the zones would be, but those of us who had to use their theories quickly learned not to trust them too much. Sure, if they predict a zone'll be in a spot, it'll often be true. But not always. And even in a zone there'll be pockets of normality. And we still have no idea why they'll grow with the moon, some of them disappearing completely with the New Moon.

Back then, though, we thought we knew everything.

"On the way in we saw a huge croc. I didn't think they came out that close to the ocean, but that one was big as a sea serpent, must've been 50-60 feet long.

"No, I don't know what that is in meters. Damn fools. Eat you for an hors d'oeuvre. Snap you clean away."

You know, I'm leaving out the parts where we find him some whiskey, or roll over another drunk for some fedsticks.. Dunno. And I'm sure I'm still forgetting some things. Memories are the most deceptive creatures in the awakened world. So, here goes:

He hacked up some phlegm. Some of the new kids left.

Hm... Now, you're probably getting a picture of Patch-eye as an old, dying drunk. Okay, that's what he was. But he was a lot more than that to us. Most of the kids had no father, or if they did, he hated them. A lot of the kids had no parents at all. Patch-eye was by no means a father substitute, but he was someone who existed.

I almost said 'a lot of my friends' instead of 'a lot of the kids,' but that'd be misleading. We stayed together for protection and order, not out of any need for friendship. You lose that real fast in the sprawl.

He wiped his face, and took another drink of whiskey.

"We beached the boats a few kilometers past the San Marcos. The savanna stretched right into the horizon. It'd been a lot easier to just bring the whole ship in, but that was against the law. It was still legal to hunt, though, cause the jungle was still screwy, and they were trying to regrow it. Crocs, for example — we saw them everywhere, cause the Savannah favored them more than the jungle would've. I guess it was more an everglades than a Savannah, but not quite as much water.

"We made sure we camped far away from the river. We brought the rafts, put 'em on posts, and pitched the cots a foot off the ground. Made sleeping a whole lot easier.

"We got a message from the ship, that our contacts were further in, into the remaining jungle, another two or three days upriver.

"At night, the insects made more noise than a city street. To the south east, we saw what looked like the lights of a small city, but there were no cities here anymore. The only cities left in the Amazon were much closer to the Atlantic. I've heard rumors of dead cities inhabited by awakened animals and ghosts, and we were glad the insects drowned out whatever noises might be coming from that ghost city.

"In the morning, we pushed off again, poling slowly upstream. We passed another dead city, and as we passed I could've sworn the insects were speaking a barely audible Indian tongue. We, though, pushed on in silence."

Oh yes, I almost forgot. He emptied a bottle of tequila. We'd found him a near empty bottle thrown away from a nearby bar. He spit the worm out, and it rolled through the cracks in the dock. I heard it splash in the bay. Big worm. He went back to the whiskey.

"That night, there were fewer bugs, but more animals. What were once flying squirrels hopped like gliding rabbits

in the tall grass and bush. A dragon or flying snake flew across the moon sometime early in the morning.

"The third day, we pushed up the Jari, a smaller river feeding the Amazon, and soon entered a new, low jungle. By night, the jungle was deep and dark. We got word from the trappers and the ship, and figured we'd meet up the next day.

"We were just about to sleep, when we hear this sizzling in the sky, like frying bacon. Fire fell from the trees. In another trip, among the Taka-noo, I learned that they're familiar with this, and blame a spirit sloth, whose shit is the source of all fire. We had to high-tail it out of there real quick.

"I never want to move around in the jungle at night again."

We felt the same way about New Orleans.

"And then, to top it all off, sometime around 4 in the morning, it starts raining, but the rain don't make it to us before it rolls around in the forest roof. By that time, the drops were green and warm, and felt like nothing less than a giant's piss.

"So, come morning, the sun starts heating the jungle up, and we're wet and tired. And there, as we round a corner in the river, are the trappers. So, we carried the animals back and made it to the ship by sundown. Now, you get out of here."

What?

"Nope, that's the way it happened."

Absolutely not, and we knew it. Then some kid, I don't remember who (well, I remember who, just not his name. When we got a football game going, he was a good fullback), handed him a burger. God knows where it came from.

"OK, so we see the trappers, and they've got this monster in what looks to be the flimsiest cage I've ever seen. I mean, it had good-sized bars, but this thing was huge."

The kids up close moved back a bit to get out of range of the spray.

"I had no idea what it was, but I knew it was awakened. Even in the jungle nothing like that was natural.

"It had long arms, like an orangutan, but it stood at least 8 feet tall. No, 8 feet huge. It was an off green, like the underside of a frog, and the head... the head was horrible. It was like someone upended a giant spider and stuck it on this thing's neck, the bottom side facing towards us, and a square, fanged mouth in the center.

"When it roared, it sounded like a dying elephant.

"That's not true. I've never heard an elephant dying. Only ones I've seen have been dead.

"Anyway, we round the bend and there this thing is, caged, sure, but for how long? John and I, we figure we ought to turn around right there. John's always been a smart one. I think he even went to college. He's probably back in England now.

"I have no idea how they captured this thing. They must've pumped it full of a keg of tranq. But as we get closer, we realize it won't be quite so hard to get it to the ship—the cage is on pontoons, and there are real long ropes for tying it to their boat. So as long as it can't break out—and we're hoping, hey, it hasn't broke out yet, maybe it can't—as long as it can't break out, we're set. Lug it in, load it up, and go home. No problem. Piece of fuckin' cake.

"There's no way we can sleep, so we figure we might as well get started. They had a long canoe, so eight of us row. The captain and two of the hunters (I guess there were only two hunters, and the rest were grunts like us)

trail behind on two boats, each connected to a corner of the cage; they're about 30 feet behind the cage, and I'll bet they were wishing they were further. The two hunters each had tranq rifles, and they're trailing behind at an angle, so they can fire if they need to without worrying about us.

"Cause if one of us gets tranqed, one of them'll have to row, of course. One thing I wasn't too sure on was what would happen if the cage started to catch up with us, because we were going downstream, after all. But I guess the canoe caught more current than the cage. That was one problem we didn't have to worry about.

"It was pretty easy going. The river was slow and steady, and we didn't have to work too hard. Coming out onto the Amazon was the same, though it got heady in some places. The Amazon's pretty wide, though, and all we had to worry about was keeping centered.

"And we made it. Past the dead cities and the talking insects, and into the basin. Had a bit of trouble loading it onto the San Marcos, though. One sailor got a nice gouge in his arm on that one. The ship's doctor had a hell of a time keeping it from turning green. And then, we pulled out and headed home.

"All through the first day and night it howled and banged on its cage. And the second day as well. But the second night... That night was dark. Probably we missed a storm further south. But I woke up that night, sometime after midnight, and I knew something was wrong. I felt like I did the time I got caught in the eye of Hurricane Gary. Like time just up and stopped. But I realized it wasn't like the hurricane at all—I could still hear the waves punching up against the side of the ship, and there was a wind whistling through the sails.

"There wasn't an ounce of sound coming from the hold. I tried to wake up the guy next to me, but he wasn't there, and there was something warm and wet there instead. There was no light. I got off the bunk and woke up John, below me. We went up top, so as not to bother the guys sleeping.

"The captain and mate were up already. In the light of their lantern, I saw blood all over my hand, and then I got scared. Why we survived, I don't know. The captain had gone to the hunters' quarters to find out if the creature's silence was anything to worry about, and they were already dead, torn apart, he said. The thing had to be loose, and we had no weapons of worth to stop it. Not up here, anyway. Maybe, maybe the autos downstairs.

"Oh yeah, the tranq guns were gone. Washout asked John and I to go down and get everybody else up top. So we did. I was feeling too sick to think straight. Downside, John got his bow, and I woke up the two riflemen. Or tried to. One of 'em was dead, torn apart. The other one woke up groggily. I told him to get his auto, we had to get up. Then, John and I woke half of everyone else up—the other half were dead. The creature had come through here and chosen half of us to kill. We were freaked. The rifleman began to understand what was going on, we just told him to follow us upstairs.

"Then he said he couldn't find his clips. He'd left one in and two taped to the sides before turning in—he always did. But all three were gone, and so was his box.

"We heard something growl in the shadows, and we just shit our way topsides. All told, there were ten of us left. And the only weapon between us some knives and a single bow. We started lowering the lifeboats. Washout was against it at first, but we convinced him in seconds. There was no way we were going to take this thing on and live.

"We lowered the two lifeboats, and while we were doing that the captain convinced two others to help him lower the sails. Then we climbed down, and five of us in each boat. John was the last one down, covering us with his bow. Bravest man among us, he was. I've nothing against college folk. We rowed off, watching the ship sit there on the ocean, against a backdrop of one or two stars poking through the clouds.

"We were picked up three days later, half... trashed, by a Cuban fishing boat.

"Washout hired some guns and a ship to help him find his own ship. He'd bet a lot of money on that boat. They found his ship to, two or three weeks later. The creature was gone, but from what I hear, the corpses were all strung about from the yardarm, skinned to the muscle, and no carrion-eaters or insects anywhere near.

"I told you Washout brought his ship to Europe. Nobody here would sign on to a ghost ship."

LIFE IN THE SHADOWS

Jeff Kim <Shadowr574@aol.com>

"Who's the target?" asked Marty.

"Daniel Drummonds, President/CEO New Dawn Biotechnologies," replied another voice on the other end of the vid-phone.

Marty Flash looked into the dark, unlit screen on his desktop vid-phone. As usual, his Johnson had turned off the vid-feed. Marty had done, likewise. Still, he hoped to gleam a bit more as to who he was working for by the sound of his voice. Nothing.

"Fifteen percent up top?"

"As per the prearranged contract, Mr. Flash," replied the unknown Johnson. "Prepare for the transfer."

Inserting a credstick into the phone, Marty pressed the receive button and in less than a second, the funds transfer was complete. He double checked the credstick and was satisfied.

"I'll get back to you, Mr. Johnson," said Marty as he reached for the disconnect button.

"I'll be waiting," replied the Johnson just as the line was severed.

Marty leaned back in his recliner—real leather, of course—and played absently with the certified credstick in his hand. His thoughts went to his earlier days running the shadows. When he was considered a novice decker back then. He'd jump at the chance for a job like this one, but now he was feeling the weight of being a veteran shadowrunner. Always having to look over your shoulder. Having to cut off ties with old friends due to "personal security precautions." Sometimes he thought about giving it all up and just retiring on his two Zurich-Orbital accounts. But then reality would hit him again and he knew he'd be in this line of biz until he lost his edge or got geeked on a run.

Probably both.

He turned to the vid-phone again and dialed in another number. This time, he switched the phone to accept video as well. For a few seconds, he stared at the blank screen, but then it was soon replaced with the beautiful face of Rainbow. Her face was immaculate, as usual, with streaks of multi-colored hues running through her jet-black hair. Her eyes twinkled as she recognized Marty and grinned openly.

"Hoi, Flash! Whazzappening?"

"Hoi, Rainbow," smiled Marty. "I got a run for us."

Rainbow's eyes lit up at this news and she replaced her warm smile with a professional look of seriousness. Even

looking at her stern appearance, she was stunning. Marty often wondered if she used any of her magic to make her look as good as she did. But then his mind tuned in to the business at hand.

"Data-snatch?" asked Rainbow.

"No. Wetwork."

A frown formed on her delicate features. Marty knew she didn't like this line of work, but he thought she might make an exception once she knew who the target was.

"We're going after Drummonds."

At that, Rainbow showed surprise and, as her face loomed in on the vid-screen, he knew she was leaning in closer.

"The Drummonds? New Dawn?" she repeated.

"Yes," was Marty's only reply.

There was a moment of silence as Rainbow mulled the thought over in her head. Marty tensed himself for her negative reaction and mentally went through the list of other candidates who could replace her talent. He could think of none.

"All right," she said evenly. "I'm in."

Marty breathed a sigh of relief and he smiled again. He was about to thank her for accepting the offer, but he knew now wasn't the time or the place for it. Professionalism. Instead, he leaned back in his recliner and held up the credstick.

"Prepare for a transfer of 30,000¥," he said.

"No," said Rainbow. "I'm not taking any chances, Marty. Stick-to-stick transfer only."

"Null perspiration, chummer."

Marty placed the certified credstick into his jacket. He would have to meet up with her later and make the transfer then. He knew her phone line was secure, but if she wanted to play it extra safe, so be it. Sometimes paranoia can be your best friend.

"Call up Whistler and Spider," he said.

Rainbow shook her head.

"Spider's out of town. He's on another run," she informed him. "I'll get in touch with Whistler. You want back up?"

Marty thought for a moment and then shook his head.

"No. Let's keep this one under wraps."

"Null perspiration."

"I'm going to jack in and see what I can pull on Drummonds and then I'll get back with you," said Marty. "Expect me in a few hours."

"Will do, Flash."

Marty disconnected his line feed and Rainbow's image disappeared. He stood up and checked his door locks and alarm system. Both were activated and would give him some early warning in case somebody tried to break into his flat while he was jacked into the Matrix. Then he slid into his recliner and placed his Fairlight Excalibur onto his lap. He uncoiled a fiber optic line and hooked one end to the cyberdeck and the other end into the datajack on his left temple. Glancing around the room once more, he then slipped into a dormant state as his mind joined the cold, virtual world of the Matrix.

It was beautiful. Dazzling lights of pure data flowed past him as his persona icon flew through the highways of information. He could see the massive green tower icon of Transco Matrix in the distance, the megacorp that controlled security for most smaller corps in Houston. But his target was the red orb icon of New Dawn Biotechnologies.

Marty's silver angel icon passed through the perimeter IC without a hitch. He'd used a simple sleaze program. Once inside New Dawn's outer defenses, Marty initiated a

deception program which would allow him to scan for data without triggering any IC. Especially nasty Black IC, the kind that'll fry a person's deck as well as his brain.

His silver angel icon walked down the virtual halls of New Dawn, scanning the room icons for access to the personnel files. He finally found the top-level employee records room and his icon slipped into that node. Looking around and scanning for any trace of IC, Marty activated a browse program to find anything pertaining to CEO Daniel Drummonds.

He got data on Drummonds in spades. He had to sift through most of the drek and concentrate on his weekly schedule. Without the advanced browse program he had, finding the info he needed on Drummonds would have taken Marty weeks. But he wasn't one to jack into the Matrix ill-equipped.

After wizzing through several mega-pulses of data on Drummonds, Marty finally found what he was looking for. He quickly made a file copy and placed the data icon into his virtual breeches. Then he jumped back into the previous node he had come from, right into a huge, dark hulking form.

Marty had very little time to react. He initiated an attack program and launched it at the Black IC. A fiery yellow bolt shot from his persona icon and into the hulking icon, but it barely fazed it at all. The Black IC construct swung one huge massive paw at Marty's icon, barely missing his right shoulder. The force of the blow didn't matter in the Matrix. The fact that you got hit at all could spell your doom. Marty retaliated with a Slow program which struck the Black IC construct dead-on. There was a significant change in speed as the Black IC stopped moving at lightning speed. This gave Marty a chance to jump out of that node and into another one.

Then Marty readied his Attack program and waited. Sure enough, the Black IC construct came barreling its way into Marty's node. Marty let loose his program and it struck the Black IC construct in the form of a bright blue arrow. This time, the Black IC dissipated, signifying its destruction.

A chill went up Marty's spine, whether in his mind or his meat-body, he didn't know. He immediately did what any competent decker worth any brains would do. He jacked out.

. . .

Whistler hated the rain. It always seemed to be pouring whenever he was outside. Maybe it was bad karma or some other such drek. Or maybe he should take this as a sign to get out more often. He'd spend most of his time holed up at his flat, cleaning and playing with his toys. Only he had a different sort of toy box. The kind that holds heavy pistols, assault rifles, submachine guns, and knives. Most of his free time, when he wasn't out on a run, were spent either watching the trid and turning his mind into a six-pack of Fizzygoo or sleeping. But tonight he had a job to do.

Marty had called up Rainbow just as he had arrived at her flat. He gave them the target briefing and relayed the data he scanned off of New Dawn's files. Yep, this Drummonds character was a real Boy Scout. He was into dirty politics, several assassinations on his way up the corp ladder, and into all kinds of illegal drek, like dumping toxic waste chemicals into the Houston Ship Channel.

Apparently, someone on a high enough level got annoyed at him and decided to hire out some runners to geek him. Which is why Whistler was standing out in the cold, pouring rain waiting for Drummonds' Mitsubishi Nightsky limousine to arrive at the Wine and Dine restaurant, a posh "members-only" nightclub-style

hangout for high executive employees. It was Tuesday and, according to the data Marty had pulled, Drummonds never missed a beat. He always arrived at this night spot at 11 PM sharp.

Whistler was hunched down over his BMW Blitzen 2050 motorcycle across the main street from the Wine and Dine. His right hand reached into his leather duster and touched his Heckler and Koch MP-5 TX submachine gun. The palm induction pad imbedded into his right hand made contact with the Smartlink grip and he knew he was wired to go.

At exactly eleven, just as Marty had said, a black Mitsubishi Nightsky pulled up in front of the Wine and Dine. Whistler shifted his cybereyes to thermographic and detected four people in the car. He checked the MP-5's ammo readout display to make sure it was fully loaded and thumbed the selector switch to burst-fire mode. No sense spraying excess ammo onto the streets.

The driver and shotgun passenger doors opened and two corp suits stepped out. The driver was a tall Caucasian male, moving towards the rear of the limo and that's when Whistler made his move. Calmly, but swiftly, he dismounted his Blitzen and started to cross the street. He paid full attention to the limo and its passengers, knowing full well that Rainbow was covering his rear just in case he needed magical support or someone else tried to get involved.

He was almost halfway across the street, his right hand holding the MP-5 low in the folds of his duster, when the driver suddenly turned to face him. He knew he was spotted. Moving with full speed now, Whistler's wired reflexes kicked into action and he was now raising the barrel of his MP-5 towards the driver. The driver, in turn, was almost as fast as him, reaching into his suit for the gun Whistler knew was there. He was obviously jacked up to some degree, although definitely not as much as Whistler. He never made it.

Whistler tightened on the trigger and released a burst of APDS rounds into the driver's chest. Three rounds formed a stitching pattern across his previously dry-cleaned suit. Surprisingly enough, the driver gave him very little trouble afterwards. The shotgun passenger, another male Caucasian, was on the other side of the limo, also going for his gun, but another two bursts from Whistler's MP-5 made him disappear in a cloud of lead and blood.

He checked the ammo readout display and found that he only had eleven rounds left. Then the rear cab door on his side opened and a third suit jumped out, cradling an Ingram submachine gun. It had potentially more kick to it than his MP-5, but without the added frills. This time, it was an Asian, wearing a pair of Raybands. Whistler clenched the trigger again and six more rounds slammed into the car door. The corp bodyguard disappeared behind the bullet-infested door, trailing blood.

Whistler's left hand reached into his duster and came out revealing an aerodynamic object—an aerofoil grenade. This particular grenade was a defensive model, the kind with a relatively small blast radius. He continued his approach to the limo, activating the aerofoil grenade. Glancing up and down the streets, Whistler found no one standing around. The crowd probably found the current weather conditions hazardous to their health.

Suddenly, the third suit rose out from behind the door again, blood trickling down his right temple and wearing a malicious grin if Whistler ever did see one. Whistler rounded the open door quickly and his right heel rose up and around to connect with the suit's neck. He heard a satisfying snap as the man fell back down, never to get up

again. He caught a glimpse of Daniel Drummonds' fearful expression as he poked his head inside the limo for a quick target confirmation.

"Hello, Mr. Drummonds! Can I see your driver's license and proof of registration?"

Then he chucked the aerofoil grenade into the limo and beat feet back to his parked Blitzen. He heard the muffled sound of an explosion and glanced back to make sure Drummonds hadn't escaped. He hadn't. Then Whistler jumped on his Blitzen and rode off. He could hear sirens from a Lone Star cruiser, but he wasn't worried. By the time they got to the scene, he'd be long gone. He stashed the MP-5 in his duster and loosened the throttle on his Blitzen, roaring all the way into the night.

Easy prey.

. . .

Rainbow hated this part of a run the most. This was when you were supposed to be at your ease, but past experience taught her that now was the time to be on full guard. She was sitting in a booth at McHughs, waiting for their Johnson to show up with the rest of their nuyen. Marty, Whistler, and she had decided on this plan.

McHughs was a good place to set up a meet, especially if you were worried about the other side setting up an ambush. All McHughs restaurants were the same. The food tasted bad, but the McHughs security personnel were of prime choice. She knew that Whistler was somewhere outside, probably on a rooftop, training the sights of his Walther MA 2100 sniper rifle on some poor fragger, testing his line-of-sight. He'd be the trigger man in case anything wrong went down. Marty was at home, decked into the McHughs security perimeter cameras.

"They're here," came Marty's voice via the small earplug unit hidden in Rainbow's right ear.

She kept the boom microphone portion of her earplug radio unit below the table in her lap, so as not to freak out the McHughs goons. Whistler and Marty, she knew, were also both wearing identical units. Pretending to take a sip of her soycola, she brought the microphone up to her lips and signaled that she heard him.

Then Rainbow set the microphone back into her lap and tried to calm herself. Her nerves were threatening to overload, but her outward appearance was one of cool professionalism. Her right hand subtly reached deep into her right boot and unholstered the Walther Palm Pistol hidden there. She also put that on her lap.

From a nearby booth, she was suddenly aware of someone watching her. She slowly panned her head in a discreet manner towards that general direction. A small 12 year-old boy was watching her intently, having seen her hold-out pistol emerge from her high-top boots. His mother was obviously distracted by some fascinating article in the latest issue of *Cosmo*. Rainbow smiled at the boy and placed her index finger to her lips. The boy nodded and smiled back.

Then Rainbow concentrated on the two gentlemen entering the side door of McHughs. They were reeking of corp with their expensive suits and ties and their cologne or aftershave lotion. Rainbow couldn't tell the difference even if she cared enough to try. They scanned the room openly and Rainbow could feel the McHughs security personnel tense. Stupid. But then, she reminded herself that they were corp wageslaves and not shadowrunners. Zero professionalism.

"One hundred nuyen says I can penetrate the ballistic composite glass of McHughs and peg both fraggers cleanly," came Whistler's voice through her earplug receiver.

The shorter one spotted her first and motioned to his partner. They both walked towards her, oblivious to the McHughs security guards' scrutiny.

"Hey, if you line 'em up for me, I think I can waste 'em both with only one round of APDS, Rainbow," spoke Whistler again.

Rainbow stifled a smirk just as the two sararimen slid into her booth opposite her end of the table.

"Just tryin' ta be cost-conscious, ya know," said Whistler.

The shorter man was obviously in charge, as he placed a credstick onto the table top and grinned openly at Rainbow.

"And here is the one hundre—" he began before Rainbow cut him off with a wave of her hand.

Rainbow wordlessly picked up the certified credstick and scanned it. Sure enough, it contained one hundred thousand nuyen. She pocketed the credstick and looked at the short man sternly.

"It's not wise to discuss this any further, gentlemen," she said, without any emotion in her voice. "I believe this meeting is at an end."

The short man looked nervously at her, but then he slowly composed his face again and

nodded to his partner. They both rose up and out of the booth. Then the short man nodded to Rainbow.

"It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Ms...?"

"Yes, it has," was Rainbow's only response.

The short man almost blew up in an emotional tirade, but he held himself in check and motioned to the other man to leave. They both left without further words.

"I really hate it when you make me take out and polish all my toys only to make me put them away again, ya know," commented Whistler.

Rainbow raised her boom microphone and took another sip of her soycola.

"I love you, too, Whistler."

THE CHIPPER

Reviews of things you have to pay for.

THE FUTUROLOGICAL CONGRESS

Stanislaw Lem
translated from Polish by Michael Kandel
Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985
1250 Sixth Avenue, San Diego, CA 29101
111 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY, 10003

In the world of Shadowrun, altered reality is a way of life. People jack in and chip in, using drugs, simsense, BTL, 2XS, and decks. What effects will there be when people can control their lives to the extent that chips can be controlled?

Stanislaw Lem wrote *The Futurological Congress* before the advent of virtual reality technology, but the drugs that play a major part in this work are uncannily similar to chips in 2050 AD. Lem shows us what is possible with simsense.

In a society where governments can no longer take care of their citizens, they use drugs to create an artificial world. Artists drop out of the real world and create their masterpieces in their own private world, for their own private pleasure. Companies spring up that create custom drugs which allow customers to vent their anger against individuals in a non-violent, socially acceptable way.

Lem's writing, as usual, is superb, and he deftly explores the ramifications and possibilities of a world where reality is both fixed (nature) and fluid (simulated). *The Futurological Congress* is highly recommended to any Shadowrun referee.

reviewed by Jerry Stratton

FIELD & STREAM

September 1992
Times Mirror Magazines, Inc.
New York, NY
\$2.00

There are two things in this issue of *Field & Stream* that might be of interest to the Shadowrun gamer. Bob Robb explains compound bows — how to choose them, what their parts are.

Federal Ammunition has included a wall poster that shows various types of ammunition, and describes the basics of ballistics. It's from a hunting point of view, of course, not a Shadowrunners', but for those of us who aren't weapons experts, this poster is a nice piece of work.

Incidentally, gamers who are interested in firearms and how they work should go to the magazine section of their local supermarket. *Field & Stream* talks about guns from a hunting standpoint, but magazines such as *Guns & Ammo* discuss guns from both a hunting and a defense standpoint. If you feel you need to know a little bit more about how guns work in a live situation, these magazines will help you.

reviewed by Jerry Stratton

SHADOWRUN 4: 2XS

Nigel Findley
Penguin Books, USA Inc., 1992
375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014

The writing in 2XS is awkward, and typos abound. Simply as fiction, I cannot recommend this book. It does, however, provide a good look at the world of Shadowrun. While general editing was lacking, continuity editing seems to have been tight—everything conforms almost exactly to Shadowrun terminology and effects. You can almost see the game behind the story.

But only almost. Dirk (the hero) just isn't on the ball. It's surprising he's survived this long without getting fraggged. We, as readers, can tell what's happening to Dirk and his friends before he figures it out, even though we're only told what Dirk sees. Are we more pre-disposed to strangeness than Dirk would be? Unlikely. Dirk lives in the awakened world. The traffic report he listens to warns of octopi climbing onto the highway and chomping cars.

If you're a Shadowrun gamer, I do recommend reading this. You get a description of simsense (the 2XS of the title) from the user's experience. You see a mage/free spirit relationship. And you get a nicely described Shadowmission towards the end. The virtual reality descriptions in this book are better, and more useful from a gaming standpoint, than those from the story in the *Virtual Realities* supplement.

Spoiler Warning: This book contains spoilers for the *Universal Brotherhood*.

reviewed by Jerry Stratton

HELL'S ANGELS

Hunter S. Thompson
Ballantine Books, 1967
New York, NY

What's a go-gang:? Face it: most of us have no idea what goes on in the kind of motorcycle gangs that populate cyberpunk worlds such as Shadowrun's. Well, Hunter Thompson risked his life just for us gamers. For over a year in the sixties, he hung out with the Hell's Angels, going to their meetings, their parties, and their 'runs,' loafing, drinking, riding, and eventually getting stomped. His book captures the essence of cyberpunk in a world without the cyber. If you're looking for better ways to role-play your go-gangs, I can recommend nothing better than *Hell's Angels*.

Here are a few quotes taken practically at random:

"...some of their homes resemble private arsenals — knives, revolvers, automatic rifles and even a homemade armored car with a machine-gun turret on top. They don't like to talk about their weaponry... it's their only insurance policy against that day when the Main Cop decides on a showdown, and the Angels are absolutely certain that day is coming."

"There's only two kinds of people in the world [they say]... Angels, and people who wish they were Angels.... it helps to believe, when the body rot starts to hurt, that the pain is a small price to pay for the higher rewards of being a righteous Angel."

"there has never been one, either, who had anything but contempt for the idea of good clean fun... which is one of the reasons they shun even the minimum safety

measures that most cyclists take for granted. You will never see a Hell's Angel wearing a crash helmet. Nor do they wear... leather jackets.... Anything safe, they want no part of. The Angels don't want anybody to think they're hedging their bets.... any independent making a pitch for Angel membership would be rejected as "corny and chickenshit" if he showed up in leather."

Quoting an Angel: "When you walk into a place where people can see you, you want to look as repulsive and repugnant as possible. We are complete social outcasts — outsiders against society. And that's the way we want to be. Anything good, we laugh at. We're bastards to the world and they're bastards to us."

reviewed by Jerry Stratton

THRILLING LOCATIONS

Robert Kern, Michael E. Moore, Gerard Christopher Klug
Approximately \$10.
Victory Games, Inc., 1985
New York, NY 10001

Thrilling Locations is a supplement for the James Bond 007 role-playing game, but it makes a marvelous handbook for any modern/near future game, including Shadowrun. Thrilling Locations describes luxurious casinos, luxurious hotels, luxurious restaurants, luxurious trains, luxurious boats, and luxurious jets. Thrilling Locations is written for high-rolling adventurers attempting to live in the world of royalty and money.

Maps are provided in each case. Almost all of the locations are real locations. In addition, other useful information is given. Under the casino section, a few interesting games are described. Under the boat section, some tips on outfitting the master villain's boat with armor and armory is provided. In each case, tips on npc encounters are detailed. You'll have to change the names from the Bondian things such as Plenty O'Toole, and replace 'agent' with 'runner,' but there's very little useless information in this book. Almost nothing is game specific.

You'll get the Casino de Monte Carlo, the MGM Grand Hotel, the Tavern on the Green, the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express (yes, that Orient Express), the Burger Hargraves 125' cruiser, and the Regent Air luxury Jet. All fully described and mapped out in more detail than you're likely to need.

I'm very impressed with Thrilling Locations. I can recommend it to any referee running a modern/near future game.

reviewed by Jerry Stratton

WHITE WOLF#30

February 1992
\$3.50 (\$3.95 Canada).

The February issue of White Wolf contained one article specifically dedicated to Shadowrun, and another with some interesting ideas. There are three capsule reviews as well: The London Sourcebook, Native American Nations Volume Two, and Total Eclipse.

The two articles of interest to Shadowrunners are New Shamanic Totems for Shadowrun, and The Scope of Magic.

New Shamanic Totems for Shadowrun
Berin Kinsman

These are new totems for Shadowrun mages. There's nothing special here — each entry is simply a sentence or two about the totem's outlook/personality, and the advantages/disadvantages. Most are quite useful, although the 'Skunk' looks suspiciously to have been based on Pepe le Pew.

If you want more totems (and who doesn't?) this is worth looking at. You'll need to modify some of them depending on the precepts behind your world, but they're all reasonable (even the Skunk). Here's what you get: Armadillo, Badger, Bat, Beaver, Buffalo, Deer, Dolphin, Fox, Frog, Horse, Lizard, Mouse, Opossum, Otter, Skunk, Squirrel, Swan, Turtle, and Weasel.

The Scope of Magic
Christopher Earley

This installment of the regular column The Scope of Magic provides street spells for another modern role-playing game, Night Life. Each of these spells has a place in the Shadowrun universe. They're the kind of thing a wizard/shaman might invent just to help survive normal, mundane life. Things like a stoplight control spell, space guitar, and fake bus tokens. Most of these spells should be Light, and staging is unlikely to be higher than 3, usually 1 (if it ends up being Mana-based), or 2 (if it ends up being physical).

reviewed by Jerry Stratton

WHITE WOLF#31 (MAY/JUNE)

Shadows Across The Big Easy
C. R. Shaver & Jason Rush
White Wolf
Stone Mountain, Georgia
\$3.50

Shadows Across the Big Easy is the first of a five part series covering New Orleans. This installment deals with the history of the area, and an overview. Maps are included for New Orleans, and the French Quarter. The Big Easy is a very useful guide for adventures in New Orleans.

There's not much else to be said about it. It is marred by the lack of multiple fonts: comments from runners do not stand out from the main text. Also, Voodoo is given only a few paragraphs. Hopefully, the latter will be fixed in later installments.

Overall, this issue of White Wolf is a vast improvement over previous issues. I recommend taking a look at it, especially if you're a Shadowrun gamer or a Superheroes gamer. If this is a harbinger of things to come (this is the first issue after their hiatus), White Wolf may well become the leading role-playing magazine.

reviewed by Jerry Stratton

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