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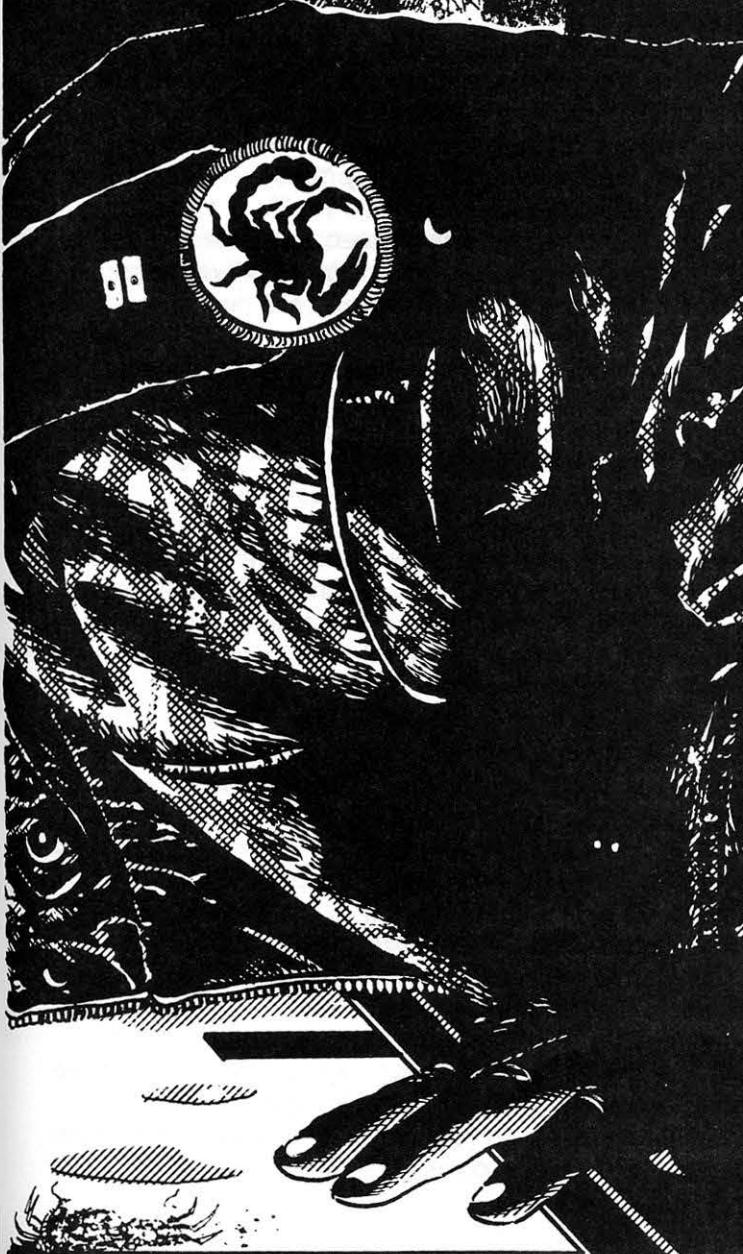
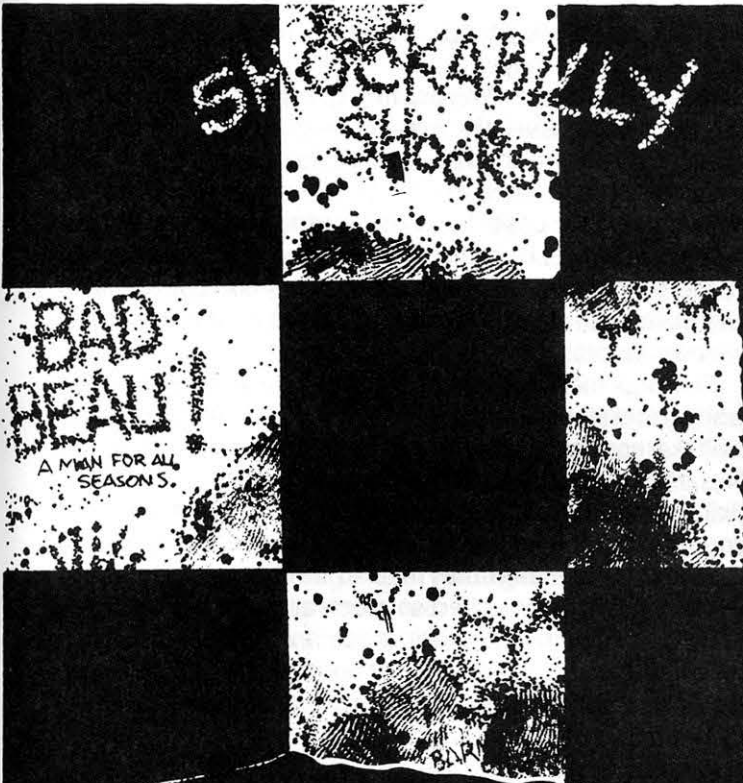
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SQUEEZE PLAY

*A Shadowrun Short Story
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Michael A. Stackpole*

As the bar's natural atmosphere assaulted my nostrils, I had a sudden urge to remodel the place with a flamethrower. From the outside, the boarded-over windows and plywood framing for the weather-beaten door suggested someone had already tried that with "the Weed," as its denizens affectionately called the place. I had to agree with the name—nothing in here a load of Agent Orange wouldn't improve. The Weed was the kind of bar that aspired to be a dump when it grew up.

I'd not liked Ronnie Killstar when I'd spoken with him to set up this meeting. After seeing the place he'd chosen I liked him even less. Easy, Wolf, I reminded myself—Raven gave you this job because you've got more control than Kid Stealth or Tom Electric. Don't let him down—you already owe him too much.

Against my better judgement I crossed the short distance from the door to the bar. A small Mexican-looking man wandered over to the place where I elbowed my way between two other patrons. His voice sounded like a rip saw tearing into sheet steel. "Waddalya have?"

I squinted against the burning smoke from my neighbor's Saskatchewan Corona Grande and shrugged. "What's on tap?"

The bartender shook his head.

"Great, make it a double."

He stared blankly at my attempt at humor. "Waddalya have?" he rasped in a gravel-croak.

I glanced at the cooler. "Green River Pale. No need for a glass." As he pulled the beer out of the cooler and brushed the ice off onto the grubby floor, I fished a handful of coins from my pocket. He twisted the cap off, and I started plunking coins down one after another. I slowed when I got near what the beer had to cost, then stopped when his hand started to move forward. He glanced up at me, shrugged, then gave me the drink.

I carried the bottle toward the corner furthest from the door. The beer tasted like his voice sounded, but cold, and I set it down quickly. Nestling myself into the booth, I unzipped my black leather jacket and settled in to watch the door, the bar, and its patrons. I kept the beer in my left hand while letting my right rest near the butt of my Beretta Viper 14.

My new vantage point allowed me a fuller appreciation of the Weed's decor. The plastic babydoll heads and high-heeled shoes hanging from the ceiling somehow made sense within the larger context. Most of the light came from sputtering neon signs begging patrons to drink exotic brews the bar no longer stocked. Silvery tinsel and some flashing lights left behind during a Christmas ages ago mocked the moribund setting, but somehow brought gaiety to the expression of the plastic department store dummy floating above a busted pinball machine. The place oozed atmosphere.

I used my beer bottle to smear a six-legged piece of that atmosphere across the table.

About the only normal portion of the bar lay kitty-corner across the room from my position. Three 'trix-jack tables, the cocktail model, lay up against the wall. I should have taken it as significant that only one wirehead was using the Weed's facilities. She hugged a Seattle Seadog's baseball jacket around her and looked cute, so I winked at her. A 'trode halo circled her ebony brow, and the light from the unit's display washed in rainbow waves over her face, but she didn't notice it or me. Whatever graphics were flashing across the screen were for outsider consumption only—that decker was jacked in deep and was playing her own little games.

I smelled dead flowers about a second and a half before I heard the click of Ronnie Killstar's wrist spur. Large as life, or at least as large as he could muster, the pasty-faced street samurai slid into the booth across from me. The jaundiced light from the bar skittered across the razored edge of the

curved metal blade jutting out from his right wrist, and a red light glowed in his eyes.

He sneered at me. "You ought to get your eyes done. I can bullseye a rat's navel at a thousand meters in the pitch dark. I saw you come in, and I saw you sit down. I can see in here plain as day."

That being the case, I saw no reason to mention he'd just wiped the sleeve of his white jacket through cockroach paste. I sniffed at the air. "I don't need eyes to find you, Ronnie. I just have to let my nose lead me to the guy who smells like his own funeral."

Two large men slipped from in back where Ronnie had been waiting and stood on either side of our booth. They were both built like those smiling Buddha-type statues you can find down the coast in San Shanghai, 'cept these two wore more clothes, didn't smile, and didn't look like they'd give you good luck if you rubbed their bellies. Still, if they were hanging around with Ronnie it meant they had to be losers—which also explained why they looked so much at home in the Weed.

His intimidation batteries in place and ready to fire, Ronnie reinforced his sneer. "I didn't figure the great Dr. Raven would trust Wolfgang Kies with an assignment of this importance."

I smiled. "TM."

"Huh?"

I smiled more broadly. "I said, 'TM.' You forgot to add the trademark onto the phrase 'the Great Dr. Raven.'" I shook my head ruefully. "That's why he sent me. You've got no manners and no sense of propriety. You wouldn't expect him to come to a place like this, would you?"

Clearly any space in Ronnie's monosynaptic brain devoted to humor was overloaded by my effort. His eyes flashed on and off as he got angry and his concentration broke. Suddenly, with a metallic snap that sounded like a pistol being cocked, a 10-inch icepick blade shot out from between the middle and ring fingers on his right hand, and he lunged forward. The tip touched my throat right above the silver wolf's head totem I wear and drew a single drop of blood.

"I don't need your static, you lickboot! Raven sent word that he wanted to make a deal with La Plante, not the other way around. We're not doing you a favor—it's you that wants one from us." Killstar's dark eyes narrowed. "I want Raven!"

With great effort I killed the urge to lunge forward and bite his face off. I swallowed hard and felt the icepick brush against my Adam's apple. "I wanted La Plante. I would suggest we're even."

I forced my eyes wide open and got the surprise reaction I expected as Ronnie looked into them for the first time. With the anger rising in me I knew they had gone from green to silver—that change is not all that rare. Ronnie got an added treat, though, as a dark circle surrounded the iris with a Killer's Ring. *Your augmented eyes may let you see in the dark, but they can't do that. It's something you have to have inside—it's not an option you get to tack-on aftermarket.*

Ronnie leaned back but left the stinger extended. "Maybe we are even. What are you offering Mr. La Plante?"

I ignored the question as a droplet of sweat burned into the pinprick at my throat. "I want proof she's still alive."

The punk snapped his fingers, and one of the Buddha brothers produced a pocket TV and slipped a small CD ROM

into the unit. I took it from him and hit the play button. The LCD screen flickered to life, and I saw Moira Alianha standing calmly before a wallscreen television. She moved back and forth in front of it, and I concentrated on how her long, black hair trailed out and through the image. If they had recorded her moving before a blank screen and then masked in a recent program to make me think she was still alive, the process would have broken down on those fine details.

It looked clean to me—the news was current as of an hour ago—but I didn't want to give Ronnie the satisfaction of knowing I felt he'd done something right. "A SenseTape would have been better."

It was an effort for him to roll his mechanical eyes to heaven. "And we could have brought her here with a brass band and an army of grunges, but we don't think we're going to recover our overhead on this one. Satisfied?"

I pocketed the device. "She's alive."

Ronnie smiled like a gambler holding four of a kind. "Mister La Plante has a client who has offered us a great deal of money for Moira Alianha. What can Raven offer us to outbid our other client?"

I tried to suppress the wince, but the additional constriction on either side of Ronnie's smile showed me I'd failed. Dr. Raven lost no love on Etienne La Plante, but recovering Moira and returning her to the Elven Lands south of the Seattle Sprawl meant he had to subordinate his own feelings and deal with the man. As Ronnie's smile cooled into a smug look of superiority, I decided Kid Stealth might have been right in the first place—bring the whole crew in and take La Plante's empire apart.

"It won't ensure we save the girl," Doc had told him.

"Yeah," the Kid had acknowledged, "But it'll feel gigabytes better than I would helping that slime."

I rested my elbows on the table and steepled my fingers. "I have been authorized to offer you the Fujiwara shipping schedule for the next six months in return for the girl. We can make the exchange tonight."

For all of 10 seconds Ronnie got that divine-revelation look on his face. Suddenly he realized how big a game he was involved in and how small a player in it he was. Then his eyes hooded over as the little maggot figured out how important Moira Alianha had to be for the doctor to offer that kind of information for her. A thought shot off on the wrong branch of his neural network, and he began to believe in his own importance.

He scoffed at the offer and eased himself out of the booth. "Maybe. I'll talk to La Plante and let you know. You can wait here until then."

My right leg swept out and hooked up between his legs. I drew my knee up, jerking him against the edge of the table. That knocked the wind out of him and caused him to jack-knife forward. I grabbed a handful of his stringy, blond hair with my left hand and tucked the barrel of my Viper in his left ear.

A Killer Ring stare kept the karma twins at bay.

"That was a wrong answer, Ronnie." I eased the hammer back on the automatic even though that was unnecessary on the double-action pistol. "Mr. La Plante, I know you'd not be who you are if you let an idiot like this conduct your negotiations for you without keeping tabs on him. I'd guess

you've bugged Ying and Yang here, unless you tricked this dolt into carrying a set of ears on himself."

A glint of gold from the cloisonné orchid pin on Ronnie's lapel gave him away. "Very good, Mr. La Plante. Your gang's trademark pin is a listening device. I salute your technomancers. I suggest your Chauffeur pull the limo around so we can discuss things in private, say, in five minutes. We'll take a spin around the block, and then you'll drop me back here. If not, I'm going to decorate the Weed's ceiling with something that'll add some real color."

The Coors clock on the wall ticked off four and a half minutes before the door opened. The Chauffeur, dressed in a spiffy uniform with creases sharp enough to cut like razors, nodded to me. I patted Ronnie patronizingly on the head. "We'll have to do this again when I have more time to play."

Whatever Ronnie replied, it wasn't very polite, and I put it down to his discomfort as I put my weight on his head while I stood. The twin pillars of eastern wisdom moved out of my way, and I made it to the doorway unmolested. Aside from the wirehead on the rent-a-deck, no one in the place noticed my passing.

I handed the Viper to the Chauffeur and stepped into the street. The white Avanti stretch limo looked as out of place on the litter-strewn street as a wharf rat in the mayor's office, but that didn't stop it from being there. I waited as the Chauffeur scanned me with whatever he had for eyes behind those mirrored glasses of his, then he smiled and entered the limo's dark interior.

Having grown up in the concrete alleys of Seattle, I thought of class as something you escaped from during the day. Despite my absolute loathing of anything and everything Etienne La Plante did and was, I still had to admit he had class. His double-breasted suit had been cut from cloth of silver, yet—if possible—it did not look ostentatious or flashy. His wavy white hair had been perfectly cut and combed, giving me the impression that I'd stepped into a boardroom for a long-planned meeting.

I settled into a velvet seat so comfortable I could have died happy in it, especially if the woman seated next to La Plante gave me another one of her sensual smiles. In the armrest at my left hand sat a frosted mug of beer—the half-empty bottle next to it proclaimed it to be Henry Weinhard's Private Reserve.

Very good, Etienne, my favorite. Is it true that you bought the brewery because you heard one of Raven's men loved the stuff?

La Plante refrained from offering me his right hand, but I didn't mind. If there was any flesh and blood left to it, the silver carapace hid it completely. I noticed, as he picked up his own mug of beer, that the hand articulated perfectly, but then he could afford perfection. I'd not heard of any assassination attempts against him, so I had to assume he had voluntarily maimed himself.

"I would apologize, Mr. Kies, for my underling's actions, but, you understand, that was a test." He shrugged wearily.



"After the bad blood between Dr. Raven and myself, you can forgive my being suspicious."

I nodded. "You can call me Wolf." I directed the comment more to the woman than La Plante and waited a half second for a similar offer of intimacy from the crime boss. I continued when he ignored me. "When Dr. Raven was informed you had become the custodian for Ms. Alianha and was called upon by her Elven guardians to get her back, he was forced to make some choices. I am sure you can understand that negotiation was not the most popular course of action suggested."

The crimelord nodded sagely. "Former employees can be so, ah, vindictive, can't they?"

Sure, especially when you try to plant them in the harbor with their feet bound in a block of cement. No one would have figured Kid Stealth would blow off his own legs to escape that little deathtrap, but he did and survived. *When your time comes, the timekeeper will be wearing shiny new legs and will move faster than even you remember.*

"You heard our offer. You get the Fujiwara shipment schedules for the next six months in return for the girl. We'll burn the data into an eprom for you. We can do the exchange tonight."

La Plante maintained a nonchalant expression on his face. "You have a decker good enough to get into Fujiwara that quickly? We're talking multiple layers of ice with interactive defensive systems and the possibility of artificial intelligence directing counterpenetration efforts."

I smiled confidently. "The only way to stop this decker is with genuine intelligence and a .45 automatic. We'll get the schedule for you."

He hid his excitement at the offer well. "How do I know the data will be good?"

I sat up straight. "You have Dr. Raven's word on it."

Whereas Ronnie Killstar would have answered with some inane barb, La Plante just nodded. "Very well." He leaned over and whispered something in the redhead's ear. As she reached over and picked up my mug, he commented. "You've not tried your beer. I assure you, it has not been tampered with."

She sipped and returned the mug to its place on the armrest. As she licked her lips I felt my heart rate climb and counted to 10—no, 15—to regain control. "Sorry," I smiled, "but after the Weed, drinking in here just wouldn't be the same. You understand." For her benefit, I added, "Maybe another time."

The door opened again. La Plante's Chauffeur hovered by the door with my gun in hand. "Tonight, Mr. Kies, at warehouse building 18B on the docks. We will give you the southern and western approaches. I would prefer this to be an intimate gathering."

"My feelings exactly. You bring a dozen of your grunges, and I'll consider it even." I succeeded in getting myself perched on the edge of the seat. "And leave Ronnie at home."

La Plante waved my last remark off with a silvery flourish of his right hand. "Do not concern yourself with him. He has been assigned new duties. He'll be feeding fish for the foreseeable future."

The Chauffeur handed me the pistol, then swung the door shut. I smiled at him and his plastic mask of servitude cracked.

"Someday, Wolf, it will come down to you and me. I'll make it quick. I want you to know that."

I met his mirror-eyed stare with my number two nasty glare. "Good. I like that. If the fights go too long, the bloodstains set, and then you can't ever get them out."

His plastic mask back in place, he turned and walked away. In spite of the nausea building in my stomach, I reentered the Weed. My beer still waited on the table, but Ronnie and the wonton boys had vanished. I waited and sniffed, but I couldn't smell flowers.

Instead of returning to my booth, I walked over to the jacktables. I pulled the bug from inside my jacket and tossed it on the black woman's deck. "Did you get it all?"

Valerie Valkyrie, Raven's newest aide, gave me a smile that made me forget La Plante's tastetester. "Everything, including your pulse rate and blood pressure when she sucked on your beer."

I felt the burn of a blush sweeping across my face, and it grew hotter as it pulled a giggle from her throat. "Cute, Val. We'll discuss how much of that makes it into the report for the doctor later. Right now we've got work to do."

II

"All right, Zig and Zag, let's go through the drill one more time."

Zag frowned, and the razor claws on the black man's left hand flicked out, then retracted with the speed of a snake's tongue. "We've got names."

I raised myself up to my full height, which still left me an inch or two shorter than either one of them. "And right now they're Zig and Zag. You're local talent, and I'm your Mr. Johnson. Now you claim you want to join this elite circle my Mr. Johnson has put together? Fine—this is a tryout. Try living with new names for a second or two, got it?"

Zig elbowed Zag, and they both nodded. For street samurai they weren't bad. Zag had gone the obvious route of adding chrome in the form of razor claws grafted to his hands and some wiring adjustments to his reflexes. He'd replaced his eyes with a laser-targeting unit linked to the scope on his Kalashnikov. He'd gone a bit far, in my mind, by having his eyes look like amber tiger eyes with slit pupils, but it was all part of the macho that made him a street samurai. Might look silly to me, but I don't think I'd like seeing them glow in a dark alley.

Zig had been more discreet. He'd gone in for body work. Just from the way he walked I knew he'd had his reflexes cranked up so he moved with the speed of something between a Bengal tiger and a striking cobra. I didn't see any body blades, but he was a bit more subtle than his partner, so he might not have flashed them. I also got the impression he'd had some subdermal armor plates inserted to protect his vital organs—a wise choice. One never knows where those replacement organs were grown. The failure percentage on cut-rate Khmer hearts made having a bandaid slapped on the old one look like a good bet for survival.

"Val and I are going to jack into the Matrix. No one ought to be able to track us down to this place, but we can't be 100-percent certain of that. I need you two to be alert and careful because when we bust the system we're going after, things

could get messy. What do you do if there's trouble?"

Zag grumbled and walked over to where my MP-9 rested on the bed. "We slap the trodes off you and hand you this toy. Then we get the wirehead out of here."

Val didn't notice the rancor in Zag's voice at his having been shot down earlier. When he had asked if she would be interested in a little camaraderie to "relieve the tension" she'd looked at him as if he was a Matrix deck with "Made in America" stamped on its side. Zig and I shared a smile as Zag's anger deepened when Val continued to ignore him.

"Good. That's it. You get her out and get her to the place she tells you. Don't worry about me—I'll be fine."

"Or dead." Zag hefted one of the spare clips for my sub-machinegun. "Freaking 9mm toy, and you've got silver bullets!? Who do you think you are, the Lone Ranger?" He thumbed one bullet from the clip and tossed it to Zig.

Easy, Wolf, better this tough guy act to hide his nerves than him falling apart on you. "I think I'm your Mr. Johnson—and a superstitious one at that."

Zig looked closely at the silver bullet in his hand. "Drilled and patched—ho, laddie, these are special. You got mercury in there to make the bullet explode?"

I shook my head solemnly. "Silver nitrate solution. Physics is the same—the result is nastier. Burns as it goes."

Zig tossed the bullet back to his partner. "Be you planning on hunting a werewolf or something, boyo?"

"Were you in Seattle during the Full Moon Slashings?"

The mention of that series of killings tore Val away from her deck. "A half-dozen years ago? That was the first anyone had heard of Dr. Raven, isn't it?"

"Yeah." I let that one word answer hang there long enough for all three of them to realize I wasn't going to say anything specific about that outing. "After that I've carried silver bullets. Never want to be without them if you need them."

Val shivered. "Viper too?"

"Amen." I forced myself to smile and break the mood. "You got that Hibatchi unit prepped yet?"

Val scolded me. "Hitachi, Wolf, and you know it. This baby has been worked over a couple of times, with all the major league mods."

I accepted a 'trode coronet from her slender fingers and pulled it onto my head. I adjusted it so the electrodes pressed against my temples and ran back over the midline of my skull. Val reached over and tightened the band to improve the contact, then she clipped the dangling lead into a splice cable. She slid that jack into the slot behind her left ear, then flipped a switch on the deck.

I winked at her. "Let's do it."

She winked back and hit a button on the keyboard. "Play ball."

Doc Raven had warned me that Valerie Valkyrie was special, but until we plunged through that electric aurora wall of static and into the Matrix, I had no idea how special. I'd jacked into the Matrix before—who hasn't—but it had always been at a public deck where I ended up inside an entertainment system. Moving from game program to game program I caught glimpses of cyberspace through the neat little windows the programmers had built into their systems, but I'd not had any desire to go out adventuring on my own.

Normally the form and shape of the Matrix is decided by

LANCON—the local area network controllers. Here in Seattle the Matrix resembled a vector graphic of the urban sprawl it en-



compassed. Well fortified databases were surrounded by fences and walls, and Matrix security teams patrolled the electronic streets like cops cruising a beat. I'd heard it had been designed that way because it made the casual user feel as if he was in familiar surroundings and it made it easier for him to find his way around.

In San Shanghai, my pet name for San Francisco, I understood the Matrix had originally had a similar geographical layout. Cablecars carried data transfers from one place to another in a landscape dominated by the Kyoto-Prudential tower. A Golden Gate bridge even carried users to the other local networks, and rumor had it that the army had a supersecret datastack corresponding to the Presidio nestled at its base.

As things got strange and the world shifted, so did the Matrix in San Francisco. When a user entered the Chinatown area, the buildings melted away, and the databases represented themselves with Mah Jong tiles. Hackers claimed that made it easier to pick out weak bases, but I don't know about that. I have heard it said, and can believe, that no one goes near the bases represented by dragons.

But that's the way of the world. Steer as clear of dragons as possible—words to live by and advice it'll kill you to ignore.

I once heard a hacker story that said if a decker got good enough junk he could impose his own sense of order on the Matrix. With enough skill and equipment he could make the Matrix appear the way he wanted it—free of extraneous data. Another urban legend born in the Matrix.

Valerie Valkyrie was a legendary decker.

After only two seconds in cyberspace, the landscape construct shifted. Gone were the clean lines of glowing lime-green streets and shining white buildings. Suddenly I found myself standing beside the pitcher's mound in a monstrous baseball stadium. Val, outlined in a neon-blue that matched her eyes, gave me a broad grin and pulled on a baseball cap that materialized from thin air. The cap had a Raven patch on it.

"Sorry if you aren't used to this, Wolf." The shrug of her shoulders told me that she wasn't sorry at all and that my surprised reaction made her day. "Warping the Matrix to my conception of it gives me a home field advantage."

Within the solar yellow of the glove on her right hand I saw her fingers move as they flew across the keyboard back in the real world. From a dugout over on the third base side of the field, a smallish man walked up toward the plate. Behind and above him a scoreboard flashed to life and spewed out all sorts of information in hexadecimal.

I pointed up at the display. "Can you translate?"

She looked at me as if I'd disappointed her, then nodded. Suddenly the scoreboard flickered, and the handy notation of baseball replaced the curious array of numbers and letters. Coming up to bat was Ronnie Killstar's personal file.

The count was no balls and two strikes, and the scoreboard reported his batting average as .128. He batted right handed.

Val licked her lips as a catcher and umpire materialized behind the plate. "Can of corn." A green ball appeared in her left hand, and she spun it around until she grasped it between her thumb, index, and middle fingers. Rearing back, her azure outline blurred, and she delivered the pitch. It arced in at the plate, then dropped a full six inches below Ronnie's futile swing.

"Yer out!" screamed the umpire.

All sorts of data poured out onto the scoreboard. It was a bit more nasty than one might expect to find on the average baseball card, but it still bespoke nothing more than a mediocre career.

A quick comparison of his successful stolen bases versus times caught out in the attempt confirmed he was an unsuccessful small-time thief before La Plante took him on as a legbreaker.

As the record of his most recent phone calls started to flash up on the scoreboard, I looked over at Val. "You can cut this any time you want. He's useless, and now he's dead." I glanced over at the number of the last call he made. "Hope it was to his mother."

Val wrinkled her nose. "I was unaware anyone had taught Petri dishes to answer the phone." She caught the ball the catcher threw back at her. "That was just a warm-up. I shouldn't have used a forkball on him—that was overkill."

Certain things started to click into place for me. Cracking systems required a vast array of ice-breaking programs. Most deckers use commercially developed software and, consequently, can only break into the most simple of bases.

True artists like Val modify and write their own warez. I talked with a decker who ran under the handle of Merlin who had named all of his ice-breakers after spells. "It helps me remember what is what. When some system is trying to flatline you, you want to be able to react quickly with a codebomb that will do the job." Val, with her passion for baseball, had designed and named her ice-breakers for pitches.

"Let's get on to the main show, okay?"

"Roger."

Val concentrated, and her fingers moved. I noticed some subtle changes in the stadium as the Fujiwara database came into range for us to access it. "Okay, we're ready to begin. Kind of like robbing Peter to pay Paul, isn't it?"

I nodded. Fujiwara Corporation was a legal shell that laundered money for a Yakuza group based further down the coast. Whereas La Plante was a broker who facilitated the movement of things from one party to another, Fujiwara actually brought contraband materials into Seattle from all over the world. On a scale of one to Hitler's SS, both groups ranked fairly high, but Fujiwara exercised a bit more restraint in how they dealt with rivals.

That means they prefer a single yak hitter to a mad bomber. La Plante did as well until Kid Stealth had the temerity to defect to Raven. Neither group played nicely with their enemies, and this little Matrix run was about to deposit us on Fujiwara's bad side.

The butterflies started in my stomach as a behemoth stepped from the dugout. He looked like something from a cartoon. He had tiny legs and a narrow waist that blossomed

up into immensely powerful arms and shoulders. The bat he carried looked like it had been cold-hammered into shape from the hull of an aircraft carrier, but he wielded it as if it weighed no more than a spoon.

The field changed abruptly when he stepped into the batter's box to hit right handed. Runners appeared on second and third, and the count stood even at 0 and 0. The batter's name appeared on the scoreboard as Babe Fujiwara, and his batting average stood at a whopping .565.

I swallowed hard. "Why do I get the feeling this man is the All Star team all rolled into one?"

Val wiped her brow on her sleeve. "That's because he is." Then she shot me a winning grin. "But that's okay, baby, because I'm Rookie of the Year."

"Play ball!" cried the umpire.

Val's fingers flashed over the ball and within her mitt as she reared back to throw. The fastball sizzled yellow and gold as it streaked toward the plate. Babe Fujiwara swung on the pitch and missed, but not by much. From the look on Val's face she had expected a larger margin of victory than the one she'd been given.

Her cerulean eyes narrowed. I saw her grip the now-green ball in the same way she had done to deal with Ronnie. The forkball shot from her hand at medium speed, then dropped precipitously. Even so, his bat whipped around, and he hit the ice-breaker solidly. Suddenly it shifted color from green to red and rocketed back on to the field.

It hit me in the left ankle, and fiery pain shot up my leg. The ball popped into the air as I dropped to the ground. Val sprang off the mound, gathered the ball up and tossed it over at Babe as he lumbered up the baseline toward first. When the ball hit him in the shoulder he exploded into blue sparks.

Gasping against the pain, I looked up at her. "What the hell was that?"

Val's nostrils flared. "Fujiwara has put some reactive warez on line. I managed to flip a couple of bits in that program and used it to destroy the ice layer that spawned it, but I'm not sure I can do that again."

I got an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. "We're in a bit deeper than we want to be, aren't we?"

She looked over at the runners on second and third. "We got a pass on the first two layers of ice. We would have wasted time and broken them, but I thought speed was of the essence. Fujiwara gave them to us to make it difficult for us to get out of here."

I raised an eyebrow as I massaged my ankle. "You mean we're trapped in the Fujiwara database."

She shrugged. "It's a matter of perspective."

"Well, try it from my perspective—one of pain."

"We're trapped." She saw me begin the fingerwork for the spell that would deaden the pain. "Don't waste the effort, Wolf. That stuff doesn't work in this environment." Her fingers convulsed, and a blue mitt appeared on my left hand. "Just use this to block anything they hit at you, and it should protect you."

I looked at the mitt and pounded my right hand into its pocket. "If I do get something I can't just put the runners out?"

She nodded. "Don't tag them. It'll destroy the ice layer, but you don't want to be that close when it goes."

"What happens if they score?"

Val's smile died. "Don't ask. This is the big leagues."

"Got it."

The next layer of ice materialized as a somewhat smaller batter dubbed Mookie Fujiwara. He took position to bat left handed, and I saw that did not please Val at all. The ball in her hand took on a bright orange color. She wound up and threw. The whirling screwball arced in and broke toward Mookie, jamming him on the fists. He fouled it off.

Up on the scoreboard his batting average went from .500 to .375, and I took heart in that. It cheered Val up as well. She prepared another program, and the ball coalesced into an opalescent sphere. Her knuckles rested on the seams, then she started her motion and threw.

The program flew slowly toward the plate. It spun not at all, but floated and dipped erratically. It dove toward the ground as it neared the plate, and Mookie missed it with a clean cut. Another strike toted itself up on the board, and his average fell to .175.

Val shot me a wink. "The knuckler always works on these midrange reactors. It never shows them enough for them to create a countercode quickly."

I smiled reassuringly. "Gonna use it again?"

"Nope." She studied the scoreboard and shook her head. "Do it again and I give it a chance to react. Got something else for this ice layer."

A white ball formed in her hand. Val grinned cruelly and delivered the ball with a half-sidearm motion. It jetted in, then broke at the last second. Mookie swung and missed, and the umpire called him out. He vanished, and I heard a couple of voices cheering.

Turning around, I saw two figures in the grandstands. One looked like a glass spider, and the other wore the form of a black cat. "What the hell?"

Val waved at them. "Just some other deckers come to watch the fun. The Glass Tarantula and Alley Cat are two locals I've met before."

That weird feeling ran up my spine again. "This was supposed to be a covert run, you know. What if Fuji learns we're here?"

Valerie fixed me with a stare that made me want to hit the showers. "Wolf, the reactors in their ice means they already know we're here. We've had an audience in the owner's box ever since we started. Looks like the yaks at Fujiwara have a line into La Plante's operation."

I filed that information away for future use as the final batter stepped out of the dugout. Whereas Babe had looked like a cartoon, this layer of ice manifested itself as a long, lean player with incredibly thick forearms and wrists. His flesh had a grayish, metallic tint to it, and his head metamorphed into that of a horse. His name appeared on the scoreboard as Iron Horse Fujiwara, and his batting average registered as .957. He batted left and the glint in his eye was nothing short of pure evil.

Val's skin took on an ashen hue. "Dammit, I didn't think it would be this tough. I'm going to have to doctor some stuff here." A white ball appeared in her mitt, but as her fingers worked on it, bloody tendrils shot through it.

Satisfied, but not looking as confident as I would have liked, she watched the batter, then let the ball fly. It cruised in at a medium speed, then broke sharply as if it had fallen off a

table. I looked for hesitation in the batter's eye, but I saw none and braced for disaster.

Then the Iron

Horse's bat whipped around in a buzz-saw arc and smashed the ball back at the mound. Halfway there the ball burst into flame, but the line drive didn't slow at all. Val raised her glove defensively and managed to get it into place to stop the ball from hitting her in the face. Her glove burst into flame, and she spun to the ground, but the ball hung there for a second, defying gravity.

I lunged at the ball. My glove boiled off, and I felt as if I'd reached into a barbecue to barehand a glowing coal. "Help here, Val!"

How she did what she did I don't know, but the flamed died, and the ball took on a blue tint. I flipped it over to my right hand and saw the runner on third make a break for home. I drew the ball back to my right ear and threw it as hard as I could.

The blue ball shot through the base-runner like a searchlight through fog. It flew on beyond him and into the dugout. A volcano of sparks shot out from there, and the baseball stadium began to crumble. In an eyeblink we were back in the city map Matrix for Seattle, and the third floor of the Fujiwara tower exploded.

Then that imaging system failed me as well. I found myself floating in a sea of data. Waves of telephone numbers crested up over me and drove me down toward spreadsheets and cost overrun statements. Just as I felt as though I were drowning in a vast inventory system, a hand grabbed me on the shoulder, and the safehouse room with Zig and Zag swam back into view.

Val watched me closely, and I knew Zag would have died to have her looking at him with such concern in her eyes. "Are you okay?"

I thought about the question for a second, then nodded. "Yeah, I think so. What happened?"

The Valkyrie's eyes narrowed. "I can't be certain, but I think the person who programmed Fujiwara's ICE system built himself a back door. That blue ball was a simple virus meant to pump spurious data into the system so quickly that things would freeze up, giving me a chance to react with another program. You tossed it through one of the layers we bypassed and right through the back door into their system. That stopped the Iron Horse on his trip to first, and I used an ALS virus to dust him."

"Did we get the information we needed?"

On cue the Hitachi deck's eprom platform slid out from within the black case, offering the computer chip into which the Fujiwara information had been burned. "Looks like it." Her smile lessened a bit as she looked at me again. "What else?"

I frowned. "Something's digging around at the back of my brain." I shrugged it off. "I guess I just want to be in an arena where I can shoot anybody who looks like the Iron Horse. It's the warrior in me."

"Pity," she laughed. "You've got a future as a decker."



III

"What's he doing?" Zag asked as I started preparing myself for battle. Val frowned at him and remained quiet as I closed my eyes and reached inside. I pressed my hands together and touched the wolf's head amulet at my throat. Using it as a focus, I let my mind touch the Wolf Spirit dwelling in my heart and mind.

I saw it as a huge beast built mostly out of shadows except where lurid red highlights rippled across its fur. Lean and hungry, it still contained incredible power. When it felt my caress, enthusiastic fires burned in its eyes, but they dulled to a bloody color when it sensed my hesitation.

"Is the time come, my son?" it asked in snarls and growls.

"Yes, Old One. I need your speed and your sureness of movement."

It regarded me with the same disdain Val had shown in cyberspace. "Let me deal with everything, Longtooth. You need not these machine men or the witch of the thinking machine. You will not need your guns. My way is pure. You know I am correct. Why do you resist me so?"

I deflected us away from that discussion because I knew the dark and dangerous path it would cause me to tread. "I need what I need."

The old wolf lay down to mock me. "I grant you what you need. It will not be long now that you and I will have this conversation again."

I shook my head. "Seven days. I'll be clear of Seattle by then."

The wolf howled, and that sound echoed through my head as I opened my eyes. I heard the hissed sizzle of the spells trail off, and found Zag staring at me with renewed respect and a bit of apprehension in his eyes. I could smell his nervous sweat even over and above the tangy sea scent and musty mildew odor hanging over the dock area. I smiled and nodded—all set now. *Let's hope La Plante hasn't gotten stupid.*

Zag swallowed hard. "Look, Mr. Kies, I'm sorry about any static I gave you before. With your rep and all, I figured you were like us." He held his right hand up, and the razor claws flicked out at the ends of his fingers. "I didn't realize you weren't chromed."

I read the confusion in his eyes like a banner headline on a news service monitor. I was known to be quick and nasty in a firefight. I was the aide who'd survived the most adventures with Dr. Raven—and that was no mean feat. To Gillettes like Zig and Zag that meant I'd been filled with a bunch of cybernetic improvements. The idea that I might be a natural who used magic to augment his skills hadn't occurred to them. And, because they had chosen a route that virtually barred them from using magic, the sorcerous arts baffled and scared them.

Zig handed me a small stick of black grease paint. He'd hidden his eyes within a pair of downward pointing triangles and had drawn an upward pointing triangle over his nose. "Symbol of the Halloweeners over in the Green River District," he quipped.

"I know." I put the facepaint stick down on a crate. "I don't paint up."

That seemed to surprise them almost as much as my

having used magic. Most folks who worked magic, especially of the shamanistic variety I used, were spoken of as having gone native. After the Ghost Dances had worked and killed lots of folks, many people travelled out to the reservations and swelled the population of the Amerindian nations. Some later left because the lifestyle didn't suit them, but those who stayed contributed to the polyglot makeup of the tribes. Consequently it wasn't completely strange to find a white man who knew Indian magic, but it was weird to find one who didn't go the whole way and paint up before battle.

I broke the tension. "I don't paint up for something I hope won't be a battle. I'll be out there getting the girl, so I'll be naked anyway." I pointed to the Kalashnikovs they carried. "They look like old friends."

Zig patted his automatic rifle affectionately. "Sighted at 400 meters for close-in work, lad. Stood me in good stead during the Triad invasion out on the Strip."

"Good." I gave both of them one of my I-have-confidence-in-you smiles. "The drill's the same as earlier today. You get Val and Moira out. La Plante uses grunges for muscle. If things get nasty, pop one or two of them, then see-saw your way out of there. If you burn a clip, I expect all the shots to hit an Ork, or you best be shooting at me. Hit and move—a war of attrition we can't win."

Both of them gave me a thumbs-up, so I turned to Val. "Sure you don't want a gun?"

She shook her head with disgust. "You've got me bundled up in Kevlar so tight I can barely breathe. The last thing I want to do is make myself a target so they'll have cause to shoot me."

I chuckled lightly. "Okay. Moira is your charge. Things get nasty, you get her out of there. Zig and Zag will keep the beasts at bay."

Val nodded. "You have the chip?"

I patted the pocket of my jacket. "Check." I hefted my MP-9 and let it dangle by the strap over my right shoulder. "Let's do this clean and all go home healthy. Places, everyone." I filled my lungs with air and calmed my racing heart. "It's show time."

I stepped from the warehouse into a dock area that had been cleared of anything approximating cover. Lit by bright halogen lights that held the night's darkness at bay, the open arena was defined on two sides by crates and loading machinery, and on my side by the warehouse I'd just left. The fourth wall, the one I faced as I slipped between some crates, had been formed by another warehouse. The large doors stood open, and La Plante's limo had been parked in it, so the hood and tail of the vehicle almost appeared to be holding the doors back.

A dozen grunges sporting various styles of submachine-guns stood dutifully behind the limo and pointed their weapons in my direction. I held my hands away from my body and kept them open, but I knew my magically enhanced reflexes would allow me to shoulder the gun and snap off a half-dozen rounds before they even saw me move. In three seconds I could clear the clip and draw the Viper from my waistband to finish the job.

Back off, Wolfgang. It's the Old One's meddling that's making you think that way.

The Chauffeur appeared in the middle of the line of grunges.

"Drop the gun, Kies."

I barked out a sharp laugh. "Dream on. You've got me covered a dozen ways to Sunday."

The grunges—others call them Orks—began to hoot and twitter like the half-witted beasts most of them are. Ugly as sin and more stupid than even Ronnie, they make up the majority of the muscle for most criminal organizations. I understand that until puberty, when they undergo "goblinization," the ones that aren't purebred look and act like normal folks. After their hormones kick in, they start thinking a lot less and make perfect little automatons for someone like La Plante to exploit. Of course, that's not to suggest they can't be cunning little beggars and get themselves into plenty of trouble, but it generally takes someone with an IQ in at least the low 80s to whip them into a destructive frenzy.

I pointed to myself. "I'm going to walk out to the middle of this area, and you'll send the girl to me. I'll turn over the chip to you. Keep your fingers off the triggers, and this might just go down well."

I didn't hear what the Chauffeur said to the grunges, but their gibbering stopped. I crossed to the center of the arena, using my magically enhanced senses as best I could to see if I'd just walked into a massive trap. The roof-mounted halogen lights caused a problem because they left the tops of the warehouses in an impenetrable darkness that did not do anything to make me feel at ease. I had to assume La Plante had people up there securing the high ground, but the fact that the only grunges I saw were leaning on his ride did not reassure me.

When I reached the middle, I stopped. The passenger door of the limo opened, and a slender woman of indeterminate age left it to stand beside the vehicle. She didn't look exactly like the disc footage I'd seen of her—yeah, everyone says that about CDs shot of them—but I knew instantly that she had to be Moira Alianha. The pale dress she wore was fashionably short and revealed legs I was almost willing to die for, but she quickly cloaked herself with a dark wool blanket to ward off the chill air.

With her head up and just the tips of her ears peeking out through the long veil of her midnight hair, she walked to me. I gave her a smile designed to inspire hope and confidence, but she ignored me and only saw the black and red raven patch on the shoulder of my jacket. She blinked twice, and then I thought she was going to faint.

I reached out and steadied her. "Easy now, Ms. Alianha. We're almost home."

She touched the patch with incredibly slender fingers. "My husband sent you?"

I frowned and figured she was confused. "I work for Richard Raven."

Moira smiled. "Yes, my husband to be."

I almost swallowed my tongue. "Huh? Say what?"

She just looked at me with vibrant green eyes.

Suddenly everything seemed to run to chaos in my head.

"Does anyone else know who you are to Raven?"

Moira shook her head. "No, not here. Why?"

I let her question drift by unanswered. "Don't tell anyone, period." *If anyone finds out that she's close to Raven, her life won't be worth a melted CD, and she could be used to hold Raven back from dealing with scum like La Plante.* His aides,

folks like me and Val, accept the dangers connected with belonging to Raven's group. Moira was lucky that La Plante had no idea of her true value, or this little exchange would be lots nastier.

The Chauffeur shouted at me. "Let's have the tea party and true confessions later. We want the chip now!"

Carefully, slowly, I reached into my jacket pocket. I withdrew from it a white piece of plastic about two inches square. The chip itself showed up in sharp contrast to the snowy plastic wafer to which it had been mounted. "I'll just put it down here."

I felt the plastic quiver and the chip explode as the bullet shot through it at Mach 4. The booming, rolling echo of the gunshot followed the bullet by a split-second, but I'd already turned and started to push Moira to safety. My right hand dropped the piece of plastic and enfolded the MP-9's pistol grip. I swept the gun around and snapped off two shots, one of which sent a headless grunge pitching back to the warehouse floor. I heard the staccato roar of Zig and Zag's Kalishnikov's and saw three more grunges drop out of sight amid sparks lancing from the limo's armored frame.

Gunmen hidden on the rooftops slowly stood, and their weapons lipped flame as I dragged Moira out of the killing zone. With so many people concentrating on just the pair of us I felt certain we'd be blasted to puppy chow before we'd gone a half-dozen steps, but the men on the roof started shooting at La Plante's grunges. The confused Orks returned the fire, but did so ineffectively because of the wealth of targets and the babble of orders being shouted by the Chauffeur.

I'd just propelled Moira through the narrow warehouse doorway when a bullet finally caught me. It blew into the back of my left thigh and ricocheted off to the left after it shattered my femur. It ripped free of my leg two inches left of and three below the entry point, tearing a chunk out of my femoral artery as it went.

I screamed, but as the echo of the scream died in my head, I heard the howl of a wolf rise in its place. Stumbling forward, I spilled onto the warehouse floor. My left knee hit hard and set another shockwave of pain through my leg. I tried to choke back another cry, but it came out as a lupine yelp.

I rolled over onto my back and pulled the MP-9 to me. "Move it, campers—get Moira out of here."

Val stared at the hole in my leg. "You're hit!"

I bit back the pain. "Yeah, my days in the big league are over. Maybe you can retire my uniform." I looked up at Zig and Zag. "Move it! I'll hold them off if I can. It's got to be Fujiwara yaks out there shooting the grunges up. That'll buy you some time, and I'll buy you more. Go!"

Zig made for the back door, but Moira shook her head and knelt beside me. "No, I'm not going. You need help."

She started making all the proper motions for a spell, but I closed a bloody hand around her fingers. "Save it, sister. You'll need all the magic you can muster to get the hell out of Seattle. Val, get her out of here."

Valerie crossed to Moira and rested her hands on her



WOLFGANG KIES

Mr. Kies, as he is known to everyone but his friends, is a rarity among shamans—he has the ability to actually take on the form of his totem. This ability is a double-edged sword, however. Although Wolf gives speed and strength, there is a price to be paid. Every time Wolfgang shape-shifts, he must battle with the Old One for control—and hope he wins.

| Attribute | Human Form | Wolf Form | Skills |
|--------------|------------|-----------|----------------------|
| Body | 4 | 7 | Firearms 6 |
| Quickness | 4 | 6 | Etiquette (street) 3 |
| Strength | 2 | 6 | Conjuring 4 |
| Charisma | 4 | — | Magikal Theory 3 |
| Intelligence | 4 | 4 | Sorcery 4 |
| Willpower | 6 | 6 | Stealth 4 |
| Essence | 6 | (8) | |
| Reaction | 4 | 5 | |

Wolfgang, as a troubleshooter for Dr. Raven, has access to any equipment he requires for a particular assignment (within reason—the doctor isn't made of nuyen).

Beretta "Viper" 14: The V14 is the forerunner of the Beretta 101T. Its clip holds 14 9mm bullets. It is an old but serviceable gun that lacks the power favored by most street samurai. Wolf's is modified to accept a silencer.

Type: Light Concealability: 7 Ammo: 14 (clip) Damage: 2M3 Weight: 1 Cost: ¥275.

H & K MP-9: The MP-9 was a short-run production model of a submachinegun put out to bridge the gap between the MP-5 and the popular HK227. The weapon itself has been heavily modified by Kid Stealth, but Wolf has refused to have anything more than the stock sights added to it. Wolf favors the MP-9 because it is also a 9mm caliber weapon, which means he only needs to cast his bullets in one size.

Type: SMG Concealability: 5 Ammo: 20 (clip) Damage: 4M3 Cost: ¥900.

Wolf's Silver Bullets: Wolf first had a gunsmith make up silver bullets with a silver nitrate core when he and Raven tracked the Full Moon Slasher. He has used them since then. While the 9mm shell is considered underpowered by many, it acts as a flechette round (-1 Power Level, +1 Staging). The only problem with the bullets (which are not manufactured in any great quantity) is that their penetration on walls or other armor-type targets is not good (-1 Staging). Still, the specially designed ammo will provoke an allergic reaction in any metahuman or magical creature vulnerable to silver and will induce kinetic trauma damage in just about anyone.

RONNIE KILLSTAR

Ronnie is typical of the new breed of cheap (in a moral, not an economic sense) thug that inhabits modern Seattle (and the metroplexes of other large cities as well). He's sold his soul to the corporate machine, and now does their dirty work.

| Attribute | Level | Skills |
|--------------|-------|----------------------|
| Body | 5 | Armed Combat 4 |
| Quickness | 6 | Bike 4 |
| Strength | 5 | Etiquette (Street) 4 |
| Charisma | 6 | Firearms 4 |
| Intelligence | 5 | Stealth 5 |
| Willpower | 4 | Unarmed Combat 5 |
| Essence | 5.6 | |
| Reaction | 5 | |

Cyberware: Retractable hand razors, vision magnification and low light.

shoulders, but the elf shrugged her off. "No. I can save you. I can fix your leg."

Inside my head the Old One growled seductively. "Let her fix you. Let her fill you with magic. Do as she asks, and I assure you the others will not follow."

"No!" I shouted at both of them.

Her emerald eyes flashed with an anger that told me my stay of execution had been denied. "Wait." I pulled the Viper from my belt and tossed it to Val.

She stared at it as if it were commercial software. "I don't want this."

I swallowed hard. "You might." I reached down and dipped the fingers of my left hand in my blood and painted twin parallel lines beneath each eye and across my forehead. "Do this, Moira, and then leave. All of you, get out of here. Don't look back, no matter what. Don't go looking for me. I'll find you, when I can."

Zig and Zag stared at me as if I'd gone mad, and Val shivered. Moira ripped my pants away around the wound and pressed her hands to it. She subvocalized a chant, but I felt warmth and a tingling flow from her hands into my leg. Almost instantly it nibbled the pain away. The energy continued to build and tissue began to heal—my body motivated to restructure itself at a rate that should have taken months. Even so, I knew the spell she wove was more than I needed.

And it was more than I could control.

I gritted my teeth and shoved her away. "Go, go!" I snapped at them. "Run!"

They vanished from sight just as the first tremor hit me. I shrieked as fire filled my ribs with molten agony. I heard the crack as my breastbone parted down the middle, thickened and broadened to accept the new angle of my expanded rib cage. I gnashed my teeth at the pain—my growing canine teeth split my lower lip.

"Don't fight it, Longtooth. It won't hurt so much," the Old One whispered.

Gotta retain some control! Can't let you run wild!

My long bones telescoped back down, shortening but strengthening my limbs. The muscles flowed into protoplasm as the transformation continued, then congealed into new muscles with new insertions able to exert more powerful pressure and leverage than before. My fingers and toes likewise shrank—the latter far more than the former—and organic claws grew to give me some new weaponry.

My head felt as if it were exploding when my jaw and facial bones broke. My whole face grew out into a muzzle, and my tongue lengthened along with it. The top of my head flattened somewhat, and my eye sockets sank back to a more protected position. According to the only person to watch me go through this lunacy, my eyes do not lose their silver color or the Killer Rings.

The bodily transformation almost complete as my pelt thickened and ears lengthened, I felt the Old One begin to gnaw on my resolve and humanity. I clung to the image of Dr. Raven sitting across from me as I changed and the sound of his voice telling me how to concentrate so I would not surrender to the beast inside me. "You have been blessed by the Wolf Spirit, greatly blessed, but that blessing will be a curse if you surrender yourself to him."

The Old One whimpered with disgust. "Someday Raven

will fail you, and you will become mine."

Stuff it, you mangy mutt. I've won this round.

The advent of three grunges storming through the warehouse door precluded any remark the Old One might have made. I gave them a toothy grin from the shadows. "My, my," I growled in a voice that even grunges knew to fear, "what fine little piggies we have here."

It took a bit more than fairy tale huffing and puffing to blow them all down, but the grunges didn't offer much more than that for a fight. They've never been much for hitting a moving target, and in my more compact wolf form I don't stay in one place very long. I left them in a leaking heap on the warehouse floor, then dashed out into the kill zone, doing my best to spit out grunge blood.

I couldn't have been much more than a gray blur as I streaked across the opening, but I felt the Chauffeur's eyes on me the whole time. I paused for a second at the place from which the rifle shot had come, but a yakuza forced me to tear out his throat before I had finished nosing around. I almost lost control with that kill, but, fortunately, the yak had some sort of augmentation that meant I got hydraulic fluid in addition to blood when I took him down.

Despite that hardship, my nose confirmed what I had earlier guessed. I took keen delight in watching the Chauffeur shudder when my joyous howl filled the warehouse district like the fog rolling in from the coast.

IV

Ronnie Killstar's eyes grew wide as the hole in my leg had been when he heard me release the cocking lever on the MP-9. Seated in his favorite chair, nestled deep in the shadows of his unlit living room, I spoke to him in a husky whisper. "Close the door. Sit down at the kitchen table."

"What's this?" He stared blankly at the little repast I'd prepared him while I waited.

I smiled at him. "That's your last meal."

The punk stared at me. "Milk and cookies?"

I shrugged. "It's the perfect thing for a little boy who doesn't know when he's not supposed to play adult games. If you'd have been content to just sell us out to Fujiwara, that would have worked fine."

He tried to look offended, but his nervousness betrayed him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Can it, joeboy. Val and I cracked your personnel file, and it concluded with the last phone number you called. Later, when we broke into Fujiwara I recognized the same number. There was a connection."

Ronnie straightened up in his chair. "Circumstantial evidence."

I shook my head. "It would have been if you could have kept your ego in check. In the Weed you told me you could 'bullseye a rat's navel' at a click in the dark. A chip's got to be four times the size of your average rat's navel, and the range wasn't nearly that long." I sighed. "And to top it off, you were still wearing that cologne of yours."

It suddenly dawned on him that I was going to kill him. The color drained from his face, and he looked at me with big puppy dog eyes. Yet before they could have their full sympathetic effect on me, his features sharpened, and a bit of the

old, defiant fire re-entered his bearing. "Wait a minute. I destroyed the chip you never really wanted to give to La Plante anyway. That's gotta count for something!"



I hesitated for a second, and hope blossomed on his face. Then I shook my head. "No, it doesn't. Dr. Raven had tipped Fujiwara about what we were going to do anyway. Fuji's programmers put a Trojan horse carrying a nasty virus in that chip that would have destroyed La Plante's computer system. The ambush, which didn't include your shooting of the chip, was just to make sure La Plante bought the whole thing as genuine."

Ronnie sank his head in his hands. "Go ahead, shoot me. I deserve it."

I lifted the MP-9's muzzle to the ceiling. "No, I think I prefer letting you wallow in your own mortification. Word to the wise, kid," I shot back over my shoulder as I went to the door, "remember that you're not as tough as you think. Don't let your delusions of adequacy get you in over your head—again."

On the way out I stopped the Chauffeur. "Don't bother."

The plastic-faced man stared hard at me. "I didn't hear a shot."

I gave him a wolfish grin and licked my lips. "You never do." I patted his cheek. "Ciao—no pun intended. Until it's just you and me." Ω

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Shadow Tiger

Shadowrun adventures should be fast-moving and full of hints that more is going on behind the scenes than your PCs are picking up on. This is especially true when your shadowrunners are in an urban environment, where they are surrounded by untold numbers of NPCs with their own desires and goals. So what do you do when your players have really been on top of things, and they are already headed for the last scene in an adventure you thought would take them the rest of the night to finish? You give them an unexpected encounter, that's what. They'll never know that it was not originally designed as part of the adventure, and the world their shadowrunners live in will seem all the richer for it.

The following encounter has been designed as such a filler for use during the course of a regular adventure. As well, it can serve to equip the PCs more fully for the conclusion of your main adventure, if you so desire.

A FOX FROM THE DARKNESS

At some point as the shadowrunners are walking or driving down a city street on their way to the next stage in a mission, a young Oriental woman runs into their path from the mouth of an alley and cries, "Help me, please!" then stumbles and falls (preferably into the arms of your most chivalrous PC). The PCs notice immediately that her silken robe has been torn and bloodied in various places, and the woman has an open scalp wound a few inches above her left ear. In the rush of the next few seconds, the PCs are unlikely to notice anything else about the young woman, but you can roll perception tests for them secretly: If any pass a target number of 10, they will notice that there are no wounds visible through the gashes in her robe; if they pass a target number of 12, they catch a glimpse of her eyes as they close—eyes that reflect light like a cat's. (If for some reason a mage views her astrally, the mage will see her astral form as a tiger.) However, even if someone in the party notices such things, he will have little time to mention them before the next NPCs arrive. To simulate this situation, tell the players, "You all have one second to make a quick statement, starting now," and don't let them say anything once the time is up.

THE HOUNDS ARRIVE

As the shadowrunners are just beginning to react to the young woman's presence, a ragged handful of gang members trot out of the alley, armed with switchblades and heavy candlesticks. The gang members outnumber the shadowrunners by two, but they all look a little battered. (Use the Gang Member archetype on page 39 of the *Shadowrun* rules, and make them all Lightly Wounded and Lightly Fatigued. The candlesticks are silver, for reasons soon to be revealed, and can be treated as clubs in melee.) Upon spotting the shadowrunners, the leader of the gang members grates out, "That's our deb, chummers."

"Here, kitty, kitty," another gang member calls, and there are evil snickers from the rest of the group. The leader tells the shadowrunners, "Move along now, and you won't get hurt."

What self-respecting shadowrunner could avoid such an invitation to fight?

It is suggested that the referee run this combat using miniature figures to keep track of who is where, especially as the gang members will close with the shadowrunners to make gunfire a problem.

FOX BECOMES A TIGER

After combat has run for a couple of rounds, the referee can introduce the next element into the scenario. The shadowrunners hear a husky growl from behind them, then a tiger (literally) in a torn and bloody silk robe leaps into the fray, fighting on the side of the shadowrunners. Any wounds it takes in a round regenerate at the end of that round (that's right, it's a weretiger), except for Fatigue damage inflicted by the silver candlesticks (which the gang members will use as much as possible). The gang members will each fight on until Seriously Wounded, then will try to escape. The tiger will fight until it only has two points of Fatigue left before trying to escape.

Statistics for the weretiger are as follows:

Human Form: Body 5, Quickness 4, Strength 5, Charisma 5, Intelligence 3, Willpower 3, Essence 8, Reaction 5

Animal Form: Body 10, Quickness 7, Strength 10, Charisma 5, Intelligence 3, Willpower 3, Essence 8, Reaction 5.

In human form, the creature does 5M1 Stun with fists; in animal form it does 9S3 Wound damage with +1 Reach. In either form, the creature has a Running Modifier of x5.

AFTER THE FIGHT

After the fight is over, if the gang members have fled or are defeated, the weretiger will turn to face the shadowrunners if it is still conscious. It will crouch down protectively, growling to warn them off. If they have not attacked it already during the fight and if they do not do so now, after a few tense moments, the creature will revert to human form, gather the remnants of its robes about itself, and tell the PCs, "Follow, please," then turn and head back down the alley. (If the shadowrunners *have* attacked it at some point, after a warning growl it will flee.)

The creature speaks very little English, so it will not respond to questions the shadowrunners might ask, other than to repeat, "Follow, please."

If the shadowrunners follow, the weretiger will lead them to a dark doorway deep in the alley. Remnants of the door itself hang from twisted hinges, and burn marks attest to the fact that explosives were used to break it open. Inside, the PCs find a two-story apartment that has been ransacked recently. The bodies of four gang members lie lifelessly in the ground floor's main room amid the debris of expensive furnishings and a scattering of smashed magical artifacts. On the

A Shadowrun Adventure Encounter

Lester
W. Smith



A young Oriental woman runs from the mouth of an alley, crying for help. She is pursued by a handful of gang members armed with heavy candlesticks. "Here, kitty, kitty," one calls.

stairs leading to the second level lie the slashed body of an elderly mage and the smoking remains of two more gang members.

The second level consists of one open room with an extensive hermetic library, much laboratory apparatus, and a trio of hermetic circles. Both the library and the lab have been ransacked, and the circles have been defaced. (But the library retains a rating of 4 in Sorcery, 4 in Conjunction, and 7 in Magikal Theory, assuming that any shadowrunner mages take the time—half an hour per point—to search through the rubble. If the referee desires, a few magical spell focuses can be discovered as well.) The room also contains an empty steel cage in one corner, near the open door of which lie five dead gang members.

The weretiger points from itself to the cage. Then, pointing to the bodies of the gang members, it acts out the events that led up to its encounter with the shadowrunners. From that pantomime and the clues that lie scattered about the apartment, the shadowrunners can piece together the following tale.

THE WERETIGER'S STORY

Roger Salmud, the mage who owned this apartment, was growing old and feeling his power slip inexorably away. Theorizing that the regenerative powers of werecreatures might hold a secret to regenerating his own magical abilities, Salmud sought to obtain one of the creatures for study. Through contacts in China, he came into possession of a female weretiger, which he had shipped to his residence.

This evening, while Salmud studied the creature, a gang of street toughs decided to kill the old man and steal his possessions. But Salmud proved to be tougher than they had imagined; he took six of the gang members with him to the grave.

The rest of the gang set about trashing the place,

until they discovered on the upper floor the iron cage containing a young Oriental woman. Figuring that the old mage was keeping her for his own perverse enjoyment, the gang leader opened the cage and dragged her out for the whole gang to have some fun with. They quickly discovered that they had a tiger by the tail, so to speak. Five of them fell to the creature's claws before someone picked up a silver candlestick, wholly by accident, and discovered that it could do permanent damage. The remaining gang members scrambled for candlesticks as well, and the weretiger leapt out a window and fled down the alley, where it stumbled upon the PCs. The gang members followed, intent on revenge, and the weretiger decided that with the shadowrunners' help, the odds were more to its liking.

ENDING THE ADVENTURE

From the weretiger's point of view, one thing remains to be done. It must escape the confines of the city and find a suitable wilderness to dwell in. Making its way across the city in the form of a disheveled young woman who speaks almost no English will be extremely tough, but trying to travel through the city in tiger form will draw unwelcome attention as well. If the shadowrunners accompany the creature to the city limits, it will be forever grateful to them and may serve as a wilderness contact in later adventures.

Besides this reward, of course, the shadowrunners also have the possibility of obtaining magical items and research materials at Salmud's apartment—items that might aid them in the course of whatever mission they were involved in before the weretiger stumbled into their midst. (And don't forget to give them a few valuables such as the silver candlesticks.) Of course, they might also have some healing to do before pressing on, but that's the nature of life for a shadowrunner. Ω



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