

Special Horror Issue

CHALLENGE 46

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MEGATRAVELLER

Just Like Magic

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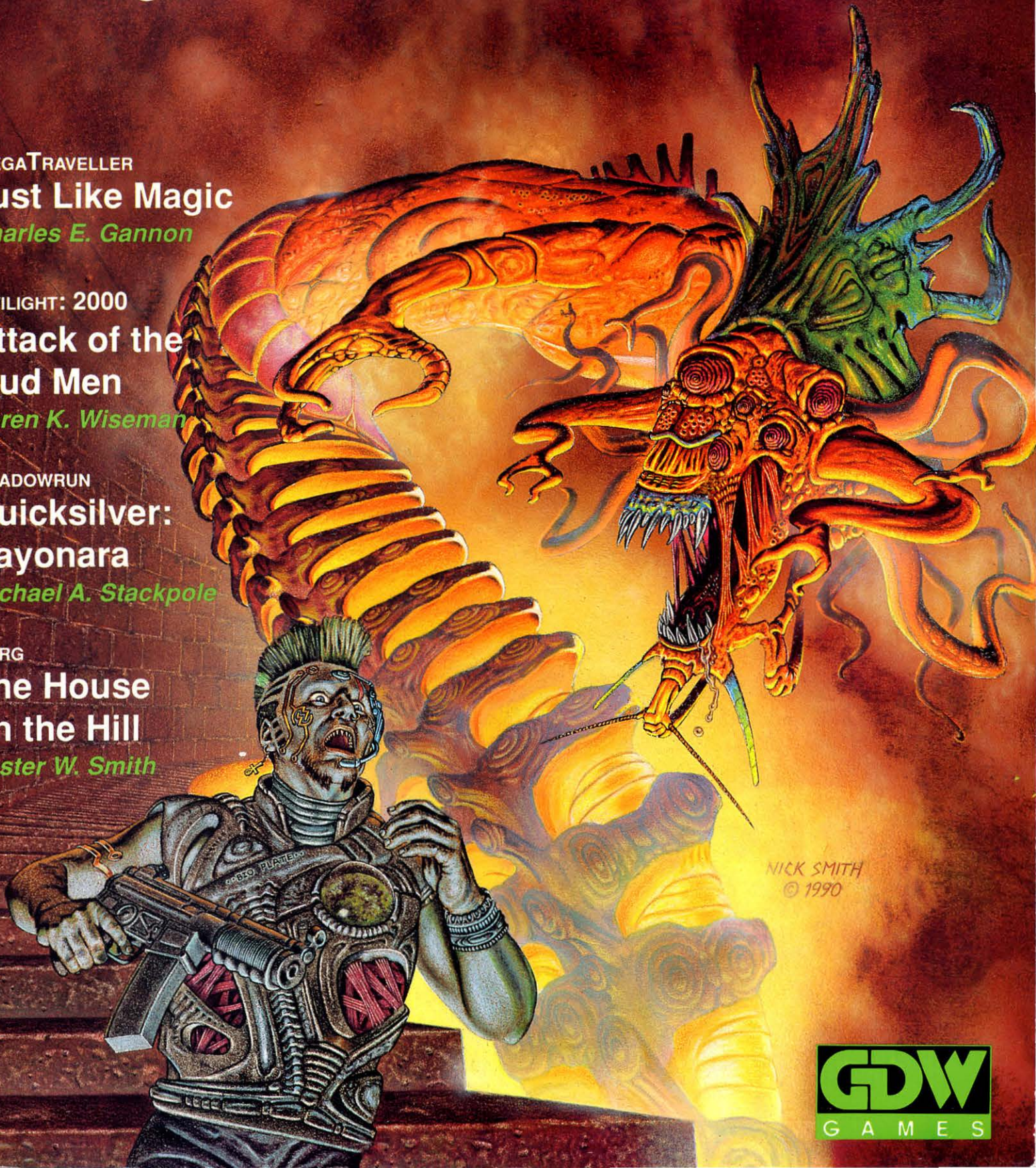
Quicksilver: Sayonara

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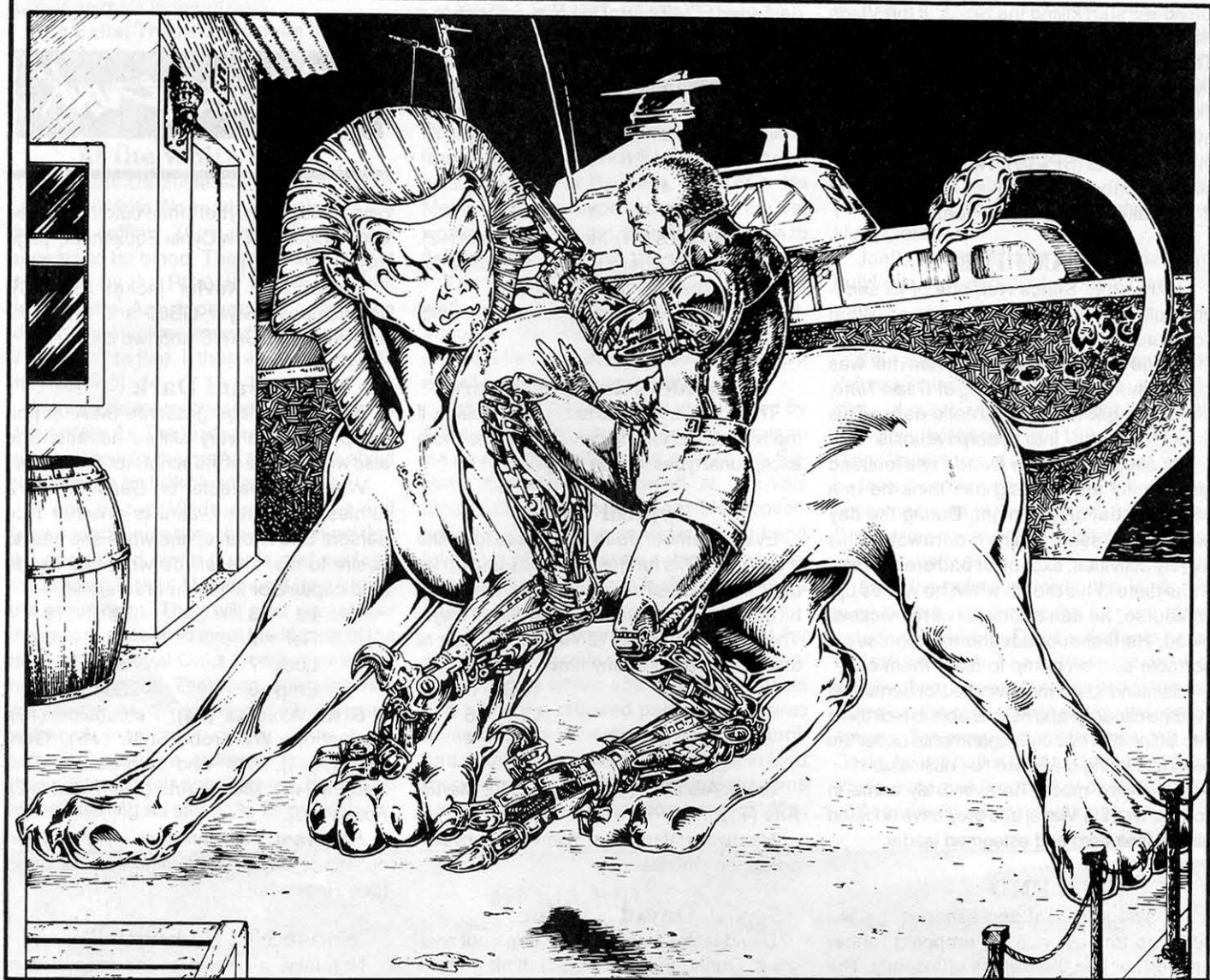
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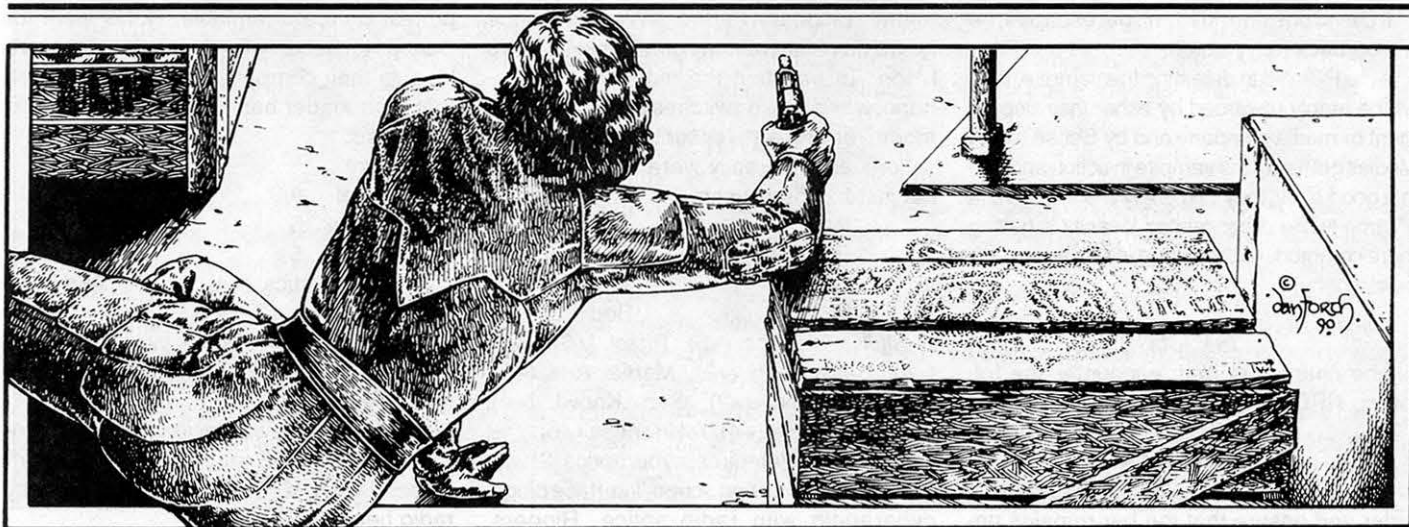
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Quicksilver Sayonara

Michael A. Stackpole



I normally define a "rude awakening" as any awakening that takes place before noon, but Kid Stealth gave that phrase a new depth of meaning. Stealth would maintain it was my fault because I was the one dreaming about cuckolding a chrome-fisted underworld kingpin when the Kid clapped his own steel hand over my mouth. The kiss of cold steel against my lips is not something I enjoy at the best of times, and two hours before dawn is seldom the best of times.

My eyes focused on Stealth and his identity registered in my brain a half-second before my finger tightened on the trigger of the Beretta Viper I'd snaked from beneath my pillow and pressed to his side. Stealth gave me a satisfactory grunt and dangled the gun's clip from his flesh and blood right hand. He pulled his metal hand away from my mouth and flipped the clip back to me. "Good instincts."

I pulled myself up into a sitting position, letting the sheets slip down my hairy chest to my waist. I pulled the slide back on the pistol, and one bullet popped out into the bed. "I keep one in the chamber."

Stealth nodded in the half-light, the laser tracker built into his right eye making a small cross on his pupil. "I know. Nine millimeter, silver bullet with inertial silver nitrate explosive tip."

The matter-of-fact tone with which he delivered his assessment of the bullet that had been aimed at his stomach somehow robbed it of all its deadliness. I'd survived six years with Doctor Richard Raven, and I'd seen aides come and go, but Stealth had to be the strangest of them all. The bullet in my gun, he had decided, could not punch through the kevlar clothes he wore, nor get through the subdermal armor that protected his body.

That, or he didn't care if it could.

"What the hell's going on? Is Raven back from the Elven Holdings?"

Stealth shook his head. "Still there. No word on his return."

I fed the loose bullet back into the clip, then reloaded the pistol. "That answered the second question, what about the first?"

"La Plante."

That one name, spoken in a sepulchral whisper like the rustle of a sidewinder slithering across dry gravel, answered lots of questions. Etienne La Plante was the kingpin who played a cameo role in the dream I'd been enjoying. I'd recently helped liberate an Elven princess from him. Unbeknownst to me until the middle of that little adventure, it turned out that Moira Alianha was betrothed to Dr. Raven. Raven had taken her back to the Elven Holdings south of Seattle two weeks ago, and then had been summoned back again after the Night of Fire and the battle for Natural Vat. That meant he left Kid Stealth, Tom Electric, Tark Graogrim, Valerie Valkyrie and me to watch over the store while he was away.

La Plante held a special place in Kid Stealth's heart. Stealth had first come to Seattle as La Plante's enforcer. Inevitably La Plante assigned Stealth the job of killing Raven. Stealth was good enough to get two of Doc's aides—my head missed being mounted on his trophy wall by a stroke of luck or two—before La Plante decided to put a pinch hitter in for Stealth. That individual, known on the streets as the Chauffeur, fitted Stealth's feet with a large pair of cement blocks, then dumped him in the Sound.

Setting the pistol on my nightstand, I threw the covers back, then turned on a light. "What did our friend do this time?" Naked—cept for the silver wolf's-head amulet worn at my throat—I padded over to the closet as Stealth puzzled over how to answer that question in his customarily taciturn manner. I looked at the clothes hanging there and almost chose a normal T-shirt and pair of jeans to wear.

You're going somewhere with Kid Stealth.

I opted for black pants woven of kevlar and a heavy kevlar sweater with trauma pads over my chest and back.

"I don't know. An Ear says a VIP is Sprawling, and La Plante is calling in some heavy favors to make him happy." Even as he spoke, Stealth moved his head back and forth, letting his cybernetically augmented senses scan for the sounds of anything out of the ordinary. I silently hoped the Blavatskys down in 2D didn't decide to play "I've Been Bad, Teacher" while Stealth monitored the area.

"Your street source didn't know who the VIP was or why he was here?"

Stealth answered me with an exasperated expression that said, "If I knew that, I would have told you."

I refrained from answering with my you-never-know-unless-you-ask shrug and zipped up my pants. "La Plante was holding Moira for some Mr. Johnson from outside SeaTac. I bet there's a connection—I bet this VIP was the one who wanted her."

Kid Stealth's eyes narrowed for a half-second, and I knew he'd filed away both my conclusion and the fact that I'd made the connection. As tough as he was, and as much of a perfectionist as I'd seen him be, Stealth seldom advanced theories on his own. He'd study a situation and offer his observations, but he left the guesswork up to others. He'd made his living dealing in dead certainties before joining Raven, and since becoming one of his aides, he'd found plenty of people to jump to conclusions for him.

Most of Stealth's body part replacements and modifications were made by choice, to eliminate as much uncertainty as he could. His mechanical left arm—the original, I gathered, he'd lost in an old accident—had been improved so it could lock in position to hold a sniper rifle steady for hours on end if need be. It could also punch through concrete blocks, but that was a bonus that came from its design specifications. Stealth's eyes had been modified to include a laser sighting system, night vision, and infrared vision to aid in shooting targets. He'd probably have replaced his right hand but he needed it for the "touch"—whether squeezing a trigger or throwing one of the many stilettos hidden on his body.

He'd even gone so far as to have the upper left lobe of his lungs replaced with a slow-release oxygen system that eliminated his need to breathe when lining up those one-klick assassination shots. That special option saved him when the Chauffeur dumped him in the ocean—La Plante hadn't paid for it, so he didn't know about it. It gave Kid Stealth 10 minutes to figure out how to get his legs out of a rock or become fish food.

On my list of things to do with a spare 10 minutes, having to figure a way out of a deathtrap did not rank real high.

I pulled on a heavy nylon jacket with kevlar and shock pads sewn into breast and back. "Where?"

When that hint of a smile writhed onto his lips, I felt an immediate urge to dive back into bed. "The Rock."

I let my jaw drop open. "The Rock? Did they do a good sensectomy when you went in for your last lube and tune?" The Rock was the nickname given to what had formerly been a seaside resort hotel that La Plante had "acquired" when his organization cannibalized another criminal cartel. It had previously been used as a notoriously hedonistic retreat for criminal megabuyers and corporate warlords deciding to "do the Sprawl." After word of Stealth's survival leaked out, The Chauffeur, at La Plante's request, had fortified the place and made it into an open challenge to the local government, Stealth, or Dr. Raven to close down.

Stealth looked at me as if I were the one operating in an alternate reality.

I raised an eyebrow. "We do have Tom Electric going with us, right?"

He shook his head. "He's visiting."

I hesitated. Tom occasionally dropped out of sight, and that generally meant his ex-wife had come into Seattle. The six months between her visits were enough to let Tom forget why they had gotten divorced, and the week he spent with her always made him more than happy they had split up.

"What about Valerie or Tark?"

Another shake. "Valerie's a decker. She doesn't like guns. Plutarch is still nursing the chest shot he took in the Night of Fire. The Orks are reluctant to put him in the line of fire for something that



doesn't directly benefit them, so he's out." Stealth forced himself to smile especially broadly. "I did leave a message for Raven in case he gets back, and I decided not to call La Plante to tell him we were coming."

I exaggerated a sigh. "Thank God for small miracles."

His grin became purely evil. "It gives us the element of surprise."

That and an army division might get us in. Divine intervention and an army division might get us back out again.

Stealth tossed me the key ring from the top of my dresser. "You're driving."

"Guess again, Stealth." I shook my head and batted the flying keys onto my bed with my hand. "My Fenris is brand new, and I still remember what you did to the upholstery in the Mustang IV."

Stealth squatted down in that peculiar way only he can, but didn't look the least bit contrite. "I'll be careful." Balancing on his left foot, he extended his right leg and plucked the keys off the bed with his claws. "Besides, you have that new radarbane paint job and a sunroof."

I took the keys from his foot's titanium talons and suppressed a whole-body shudder. In that 10 minutes at the bottom of the ocean, Stealth could only see one thing to do—aside from dying that is. He used his belt and shirt to tie tourniquets around both of his legs above the knees. He pulled some plastique from a compartment in his left arm and created some very small shaped charges which he fastened to his own legs. He set them off and managed to make it to shore.

Raven found him and kept him alive. Both of Stealth's legs were gone from the knees down. He'd taken lots of other damage—his left arm showed scarring from a shark hit—but he refused to die or surrender to the depression that would have swallowed anyone else. Though he never said much during that time—or since—I knew it was his hatred for La Plante that kept him alive, and his awe of Dr. Raven that kept the rest of us alive.

Stealth worked with Raven to design himself a new pair of legs. The original humanoid design was abandoned when Stealth located a better one while scanning CD-ROMs on animal biology. Wearing an expression I've only seen on the faces of lottery winners or the criminally insane, he pointed it out to me. "Deinonychus," he said, reverently chanting that word like a mantra. "Terrible claw."

It took some convincing, but he prevailed on Raven to help him. Human thighs grafted down into titanium shins and feet. Birdlike in construction, his new legs featured the elongated foot bones that made it look as if his leg had an extra joint. Each foot had a dewclaw and three toes—the innermost of which was truly a thing to behold. Both stronger and larger than the other two, it had a huge sickle-shaped claw that pulled back toward the ankle while Stealth ran. It turned funny-looking legs into razorhook-equipped limbs capable of slicing through foes and, in Stealth's case, let him climb incredibly sheer walls as if he were a fly on a pane of glass.

No, he hadn't ripped up the upholstery in my Mustang. The claws just dripped blood all over it.

I tied some black, rubber-soled shoes on my street-legal feet, cocked the Viper and stowed it in my pants at the small of my back, then followed Stealth out into my living room. He leaned over the back of the couch, then turned and handed me my MP-9 submachinegun and a satchel bulging with clips. I felt the weight of the ammo pouch, then shook my head. "Planning quite the little war, aren't we?"

He shrugged. "We'll have surprise, but I don't know for how long." He pointed at the satchel. "I handloaded your silver bullets, but I used mercury in them instead of silver nitrate. I wanted to try a silver nitrate suspension in a gelatin of my own manufacture that approaches the viscosity of mercury, but I couldn't finish it this quickly. I also boosted the powder up to six full grains so your bullet will have the velocity you need to make a mess of the target. I hope you don't mind."

I felt an odd chill run down my spine. I realized he was speaking

about loading bullets for maximum effect in the same voice my mechanic used to describe tuning the Fenris' 12-cylinder engine. I headed for the door as Stealth shouldered his Kalashnikov, carefully avoiding any bump or jarring to the boxy laser sight mounted on the barrel. When activated, the laser would send out an invisible, ultraviolet beam that would paint a dot on the chest or head of a target. With his eye, Stealth just located the dot, then pulled the trigger and put a bullet through it.

I let him precede me from the apartment, and then locked it. As we worked our way down to the basement garage, Stealth paused on the second story landing and stared at the door to 2D. "You've got strange neighbors, Wolf."

I shrugged. "The Blavatskys have hired a tutor."

Stealth's eyes grew wide. "They have tutors for that stuff?"

I waved him forward. "Get your mind out of the gutter. I think it has something to do with the new math."

Stealth remained silent until we reached the basement and stripped the cover off my Fenris' body. The sleek vehicle lacked the sharp angles and lines of a Porsche Mako or a Ford Astarte, but it still looked as though it were moving at Mach 1 while standing still. The flat black finish absorbed the garage's meager light and flashed none of it back. The Fenris might as well have been built out of shadow, so well did the radarbane coating Raven had given it prevent the reflection of electromagnetic radiation.

I unlocked it and climbed into the cockpit as Stealth folded himself up and dropped into the passenger seat. I slid the MP-9 into the door holster on my side. Stealth laid his Kalashnikov gently in the area behind our seats and produced an ugly little Nambu Hachi machinepistol to use if we ran into early resistance.

I reached over to punch in the ignition commands, but Stealth wrapped his metal hand around my right wrist before I could do so. I looked over at him and frowned. "You should have gone when we were upstairs."

That got to even him, and his fierce expression lightened for all of a nanosecond. "We might run into some difficulty before we get there." His eyes shut for a second, then popped open again. "There, I'm geared up for anything now. Don't you think you better do your stuff?"

I hesitated. Kid Stealth, being an amalgam of all the best technology money could buy, prepared himself for combat by opening circuits and running diagnostic programs built into the ROMs mated with his brain. In literally the blink of an eye, he went from being an abnormally vigilant and quick-reacting individual to someone who could move faster and accomplish more in a single heartbeat than even most other augmented people. He was that good—probably the best—and with him going from idle to overdrive was nothing but a change of perceptions.

Me, well, I'm not augmented in a mechanistic way. Growing up in the SeaTac sprawl of gray canyons and trash-strewn alleys, I never had the resources that allowed me even the most basic of modifications. In a day and age when almost any street tough had razor claws that popped from beneath his fingernails on command or an eye that could see in the dark, I was left to what the gods, in their perversity, gave me at birth. In a world where Man the Tool Maker took great delight in making himself into Man the Tool, I was consigned to the slender side of natural selection known as extinction.

I had nothing.

Then I discovered the magic.

Actually, the magic discovered me. From the time of puberty in which the monster inside me festered and grew to the day I met Richard Raven and gained control over it, my life was indescribably interesting. Street toughs learned quickly that he who assaulted me during daylight hours would end up a bloody smear along an alley at night. Those who lived—the majority, in fact—gave me wide berth, which made life a bit easier; but the blank times of which I remembered nothing made it a living hell.

I gave Stealth a hard stare. "I don't like driving jazzed." Stealth shrugged philosophically. "You might not get the chance later."

Reluctantly I nodded in agreement. I settled myself comfortably in the seat and let my head drift back to the headrest. The fingers of my right hand drifted up and unconsciously caressed the silver amulet at my throat. Drawing in a deep breath—and savoring what I feared would be the last of the new car scent from my Fenris—I cleared my mind and started the journey within.

Six years ago a series of savage murders had most of SeaTac's citizens cowering in fear. They had been tagged the Full Moon Slashings by the Newsnet pundits, and the fact that I could not remember where I'd been during the killings preyed on me. Actually, waking up bathed in blood is what scared me, and that's when I heard the Elven high lord had sent some of his heavy hitters into town to clear up the problem.

Fortunately Raven found me before the Elven paladins did. He taught me that the beast within me was not always the enemy, but that it was a gift from the Wolf Spirit. He talked me through one of the changes I undergo when the spirit becomes overwhelming, and he taught me how to control the spirit. He also prevented the paladins from murdering me while I learned how to master my inner self. Then the two of us, to the paladins' dismay, brought the Slasher down by our lonesome.

Deep inside myself I stepped through the black curtain sheltering the wolf spirit from everything else that I am. As black as the Fenris, the wolf spirit let a low growl rumble from his throat. Bloody highlights flashed across his glossy coat, then evaporated like scarlet fog. "You come to me at the behest of The Murder Machine?"

I smiled, which increased the growl slightly. "Yes, Old One. Kid Stealth sends his love."

The old wolf lifted his head as if sniffing the air. "Had you let me take control of the situation, that machine would never have gotten your friends."

Ice water gurgled through my guts, but I turned my anger and fear back on the Old One. "No, Stealth might not have gotten them, but I might well have done his job for him."

The Old One shrugged. "I am, you are, *we* are a predator. Prey is ours to take, and our skills are to be employed in its taking."

"Then lend me those skills, Old One. Stealth promises plenty of good hunting."

The wolf dropped its lower jaw in a lupine grin. "Strike swiftly, Longtooth. I will make your strike sure and deadly."

I opened my eyes, and instantly my supernaturally enhanced senses reported to me a world to which I had been oblivious only moments earlier. From Stealth I smelled machine coolant, cordite, and anxious anticipation without a hint of fear. As the Fenris' engine roared to life, my head filled with chemical scents, and the desire to be out under the open skies almost overwhelmed me. Slipping the vehicle into gear, I drove it out into a nighttime that, while dark, held few secrets from me.

The arc light glare of the Fenris' headlights burned the hopeless expressions on the faces of the street people into black masks of despair. Some people shrank back from the harsh light as if it were a laser vaporizing them, while others shuffled forward zombie-like and raised grubby hands in mute pleas for some kindness. Their hands fell slowly when the afterimage of the vehicle faded from their sight.

A tiny knot of razorboys from the local grunge gang called the Bloody Screamers scattered as if I'd launched a grenade into their midst. I fought the Old One's attempt to drive the Fenris through the Orks. As soon as we sped past, the Gillettes slithered from the shadows and taunted us with the insane yelps and howls that gang uses as a trademark. Stealth glanced at the steering wheel and then the closed sunroof, but I shook my head. "Not worth the time it would take to mop up the blood."

Speeding through the streets, I interpreted Stealth's occasional

grunts or nods and steered accordingly on a course he had chosen. I knew where the Rock was located, but Stealth had picked out a route that would be

safe and would give us ample opportunity to see if anyone was following us. Finally he told me to stop the car, and I found myself parking in the shadow of the old Kitchner Fish Cannery—a property that abutted the Rock's fenced-in territory on the north side.

I turned the car's dome light off before either one of us opened the doors. As we alighted, neither of us shut the Fenris up—just as we didn't need the light to announce our arrival, we decided we could do without the sound of the doors slamming shut. Stealth's feet made less noise on the gravel outside the car than mine did, but I slid my MP-9 from the door holster more quietly than he pulled his Kalashnikov from behind the Fenris' seats.

Off to the south I could see the pink glow of the Rock's nightlights. I figured the distance we'd have to cover at something just under a kilometer, and that began to worry me. Stealth can hit targets at twice that range with ease, and I half began to imagine him up in the Kitchner building giving me all the covering fire I could handle while I went in alone. I turned to confront him with this new, startling conclusion, but he held his left hand out to forestall anything I might say.

He slid the fingers of his right hand beneath his black hair and pressed them to the mastoid bone behind his right ear. "Copy that, Outrider 1—our backtrail was clear. Bring it in. Let's do it, my friends."

I instantly knew he was using some of his built-in electronics to stay in contact with confederates who had been watching our approach, but before I could try to draw a conclusion about who they might have been, a door in the Cannery slid open and a weak, yellow light silhouetted a dozen figures of various sizes and shapes. Almost instantly, above the fish smell, I caught the scent of one or two grunges, and hackles rose on the back of my neck. *Who... what?*

Then it hit me, and I turned to Kid Stealth without trying to hide my anger. "You didn't tell me you'd brought the Redwings in on this—"

Stealth's head came up, and he unconsciously let himself rise to his full 10 feet of height. "I need you, Wolf, to bring this off. I also need them. Bury the hatchet. The enemy of my enemy...."

"...is still not anyone I'd want marrying my sister," I finished it for him. Stealth had developed a habit of doing anything he could to annoy La Plante after they parted company. One of those things was to rescue other La Plante loyalists who had somehow run afoul of the chrome-fisted Capone. Bloody-handed butchers and petty criminals alike, Stealth pulled them out of whatever terminal situation they found themselves in and had formed them into a band that called themselves the Redwings—a not-too-distant allusion to Raven's band of people.

I'd not liked them from the start because we'd tangled over their excessive use of violence in certain situations. While Raven left it up to Stealth to keep them in line, and Stealth freely offered them to assist whenever we needed some added talent, I preferred selecting my own gillettes from the over-abundant supply lurking in SeaTac.

I spat the sour taste out of my mouth. "Well, I'll have no trouble with target acquisition."

Stealth smiled in a most grimly amused manner. "I knew you'd think that way, so I also got you some backup. I hired Morrissey and Jackson—they're on the inside and will take this section of the warning grid down for us."

I frowned. "Morrissey and Jackson?"

Stealth settled back down on his spurred haunches. "The two



street samurai you used to rescue Moira Alianha. You know, the two who called us in on the Nat Vat thing?"

I laughed aloud, letting some of my tension go. "You mean Zig and Zag." I nodded with satisfaction. "Good. They shoot straight and fast."

"Glad you approve. When your two boys take the fence out, we go in hot." Stealth pointed off toward the seashore. "La Plante tends to concentrate his guards on the wet side because he expects me to bob up out of the water and come at him from that direction. We'll go in at the other end and just start ripping things up."

I tossed Stealth a quick nod, and he signaled the Redwings to move forward. The light from inside the Cannery went out, and the men deployed themselves with quiet efficiency. I followed behind Stealth and hunkered down when he did as we approached the 12-foot-tall cyclone fence topped with thick coils of razor wire.

Two figures silhouetted themselves against the Rock's glow as they sauntered toward our position. Stealth moved his head back and forth a couple of times, then allowed himself a grim smile. "A bit late, but it's them." He moved forward, and I joined him at the fence.

Zig, a solidly built razorboy sporting a long coat and a Kalashnikov, gave me a nod of recognition. "Sorry we took so long, lads. The VIP's yacht arrived late at the docks—only came in about an hour ago. Assignments got scrambled. It looks like something is going down very shortly—the yacht's owner and La Plante wandered off for a heated chat."

Zag—bigger than his Caucasian partner and wearing an orange and black gang jacket with the Halloween insignia torn off—fished a remote control device from his pocket. He pointed it at the section of fence and hit a button. "There, it's down. I hope this thing is reporting back normally the way you said it would. If not, we'll have more trouble than we need in about two minutes."

Stealth answered eloquently by reaching out with his right foot and clawing away some of the fence. In a half-dozen passes—unaccompanied by warning sirens or the shouts of guards—he opened a hole large enough for us to drive the Cannery through. I crossed over first and took up a forward position with Zig and Zag as the Redwings came through. "Zig, tell me more about this yacht."

The streetfighter shrugged. "Don't know that much about ships. I make it a 60 footer at least and capable of transoceanic travel. The crew are wee, little, brown guys who find things like razor claws and the like to be amusing. I suspect they're like you—they rely on magic instead of chrome. All of them carry nasty looking daggers, but they're not strangers to guns."

I turned to his partner and gave the black man a gentle elbow in the ribs. "Yacht have a name?"

Zag shrugged. The red light in his right eye flickered as he tried to remember if he'd seen any name on the ship's hull. "Nothing I saw, but it did have some funny stuff where I would have expected the name to be. And in the cabin I saw there were no pictures, only geometric designs."

I frowned. Funny writing and geometric designs meant only one thing to me: Moslems. Growing up I'd known a family that ran a restaurant down on the strip. They claimed their people had come to Seattle before the Awakening from a place called Syria. I knew that was some place on the other side of the planet, and I knew Islam was widespread enough to make the ship's point of origin any place from Spain to Indonesia. Even with that wealth of information, however, I couldn't puzzle out what someone from so far away would want with Etienne La Plante.

Stealth crouched down behind me. "Heard the questions and answers. What do you think?"

I swallowed hard. "I think someone has gone to incredible expense to get something from La Plante. If we assume that something was Moira Alianha, we can explain the visitor's anger. La Plante probably would have apprised his client of the problem only shortly before the visit, so the fact that they are talking means La Plante must have offered something as a substitute."

"Acceptable." Stealth gritted his teeth. "Conclusion?"

I shook my head. "Finding out who the client is would probably be good. If La Plante has offered a substitute for Moira, it might be another individual, in which case I can see a rescue as being in order."

Stealth nodded and called one of the Redwings over. "Grimes, you and the boys will go in as planned. Start at the east end of the complex and work west, but stay away from the docks. Go for lots of pyrotechnics, and don't start blasting civilians."

Grimes looked a bit crestfallen at the last parameter of his mission, but he accepted it. Stealth turned back to Zig, Zag, and me as Grimes slunk away. "We'll go into the docks and recon the area. We'll see what we can see, and then, if needed, take some action when the party begins at our backs."

The Redwings took off and headed back away from the ocean. Stealth stalked forward and took point for our detachment. We crested the rise leading toward the Rock, giving me my first view of the resort. Even in the dark, the long building with five stepped levels did look interesting. I found it very easy to impose bright banners on the balconies and put bathers around the pool on my mental composite of the place. At the same time I deleted the barbed wire strung around the perimeter and the razor wire awnings above the balconies.

Off to my right, toward the ocean, I saw the massive clubhouse and marina area. From in between a couple of boathouses I caught a glimpse of the yacht riding the ocean's gentle swells. The ship's design and flying forecastle made me think of a shark cruising through shallow water—the yacht just had an air of menace about it.

The Old One's voice echoed up from deep inside. "There lairs a foe who could challenge even your Raven."

Great! Homicidal maniacs to the east of me and sociopathic grunges straight ahead, and now there's another player who could challenge Dr. Raven. I looked over at Stealth. "Anytime you want to tell me this is all a dream and wake me up, go ahead."

Stealth raised an eyebrow. "What?"

I shivered. "Nothing, just let's be careful. Something is not right about that ship or the person it brought with it."

Zig and Zag both did a quick double-check of their combat systems, but Stealth just took my warning in stride. "Let's find out if you're right." He set off down the slope at a quick pace, and his bobbing gait almost succeeded in making him look funny. I say "almost" because just as I thought of the phrase "bunny hop" to describe how he moved, stray light glinted from the sickle claws—ruining an accurate analogy.

I dashed after him, and the two razorboys followed quickly. Though we could not keep up with his pace, Stealth waited at important junctions until we caught up, then headed off to secure the next point along our path. Twice, when we arrived, we found dead guards with thin stilettos buried in their throats. Neither of them had managed to get off a shot, but with their silenced weapons it would have hardly mattered.

Stealth finally stopped behind the nearest of the two boathouses. The windows of the building were completely blocked with packing crates—telling me that La Plante used the boathouses for storage. Between the first building and the second I saw a scattering of other crates, or parts thereof, and got a clear view of the ship Zig had described earlier.

Stealth pulled me down and cupped his hands over my ear. "I mark seven crewmembers on the ship. Cross-correlation of their conversation pegs their language as Malay with a heavy Arabic influence. And you're right—there's something strange about that ship. It's all lit up, but I can't hear any engines."

I sniffed at the air. "No gas vapors." I turned to Zig. "Did they refuel?"

"Not so's I noticed, lad."

The intrusion of voices ended our whispered conversation.

Appearing on the sea side of our hiding place, Etienne La Plante strolled along with a man that Zig silently indicated owned the boat. From the top of his white-haired head to the tips of his black shoes—and for the length of the perfectly-tailored, black, double-breasted suit he wore—La Plante looked every inch an aristocrat from the days before the Awakening. Only the silver of his artificial right hand seemed out of place, but it didn't break the image—it just dented it a bit.

His stocky guest stood a bit below average height, but the Old One growled a warning that prevented me from dismissing the man outright. As I studied his olive-skinned, hawk-nosed profile I caught his brown-eyed gaze darting warily around. The man missed nothing and stroked his black moustache and goatee thoughtfully while La Plante babbled on endlessly. I saw no obvious signs of chroming, which meant the man had to be taken very seriously.

I always take magickers very seriously.

Following La Plante and his visitor at a discreet distance, the Chauffeur affected the air of a jilted lover or a young sibling aching for the adult privileges his older kin has been accorded in the family. I could read his concentration as he struggled to overhear any and all remarks that passed between his boss and the smaller man. The ship's lights glinted from the slender man's sunglasses as he turned and once again commanded the cadre of grunges and razorboys behind him to keep silent.

The subhuman grunges—low-life Orks out for a quick yen and some excitement—simpered and groveled when scolded, but the razorboys met the Chauffeur's looking-glass stare with glares of their own. The two gillettes in the middle were supporting a young woman who marched along as if drunk. Her head lolled to the side, and I saw a flash of red hair as she pulled free of one man and tried to escape the other. Her remaining captor just tightened his grip, and a grunge tackled her. She cried out in despair, but grunge laughter quickly swallowed the sound in huge hyena-gulps.

Suddenly the sound of an explosion behind us heralded the start of the Redwing assault. La Plante dropped to one knee and covered his face with his metal hand. The guest darted toward the gangplank of his ship while the crewmembers scrambled their way down belowdecks. The Chauffeur barked orders at his minions, and they instantly deployed themselves in defensive positions.

Abandoned by her captors, the girl got up and began to stumble away toward the second boathouse. The Chauffeur pointed at her, dispatched a razorboy after her and signaled him by drawing a finger across his own neck. Four-inch talons sprouted from the street samurai's fingertips as he got up to go after his prey.

If I'd stopped to calculate my odds of success, I'd have failed. "She's mine," I shouted as I vaulted the crate in front of me and set off. With my reflexes jazzed the world around me moved at an unbelievably torpid pace. As my feet hit the ground, I snapped a shot off that hit the gillette in the left shoulder, slowly spinning him to face us. Stealth's shot followed immediately and jackknifed the street samurai like a tanker truck on ice.

I was three steps into the open ground between the two boat-houses, and only the closest of the grunges had seen me. As he turned and started to bring his Ingram up, everything above the bridge of his nose vanished, and his body toppled back as if its bones had become water. As if I needed confirmation of what had happened, the report of Stealth's Kalashnikov echoed back from the ship.

Zig and Zag added their firepower to Stealth's effort by the time I'd closed half the distance to the girl. La Plante had already spun and dived toward the edge of the jetty. Bullets savaged the wooden decking all around him, but the silver-handed man lived a charmed life and avoided Stealth's retribution. A slug from someone's rifle blasted the Chauffeur to the ground, but he kept moving and scurried to cover. I couldn't smell blood because of the cordite filling the air, but I figured him to be smart enough to be swathed in kevlar the same as me.

Agillette stood up right in front of me. I could see from the way he moved and reacted to me that he'd not seen me at all and had been angling a shot at one

of my compatriots. I shoved the MP-9's snout into his stomach. Because of the speed I was running, he folded around it like a knight skewered on a lance, so I kept my finger off the trigger and sprinted the last three steps to the woman.

Stealth screamed something at me but I lost everything except his urgent tone amid the gun battle's thunder. I saw flickering movement and light over by the ship, but I was so intent on the woman that it didn't register fully. Even the acrid, oily scent didn't trigger any emergency alarms in me.

Travelling roughly Mach 2.086, the bullet smashed into me between the shoulder blades, just to the right of my spine. Even though the kevlar of the coat snared the bullet before it could penetrate my hide and the trauma padding absorbed some of the projectile's energy, it still hit with quite a punch. It lifted me from my feet like a leaf in a cyclone and tossed me forward. My left arm scooped the woman to my chest as my MP-9 went flying. A heartbeat later I twisted in the air so my back hit the boathouse and shielded her from the collision.

Suddenly a dragon's tongue of fire flickered out through the space we had occupied before the bullet gave my feet wings. Without thinking I drew the Beretta and pumped two rounds into the grunge wearing the flamethrower. The first bullet drilled an ugly hole in his right thigh, dropping him toward the ground. The second bullet took him high in the chest, and his dead body rolled to the foot of the gangplank.

Before the body expended all its momentum, La Plante's visitor appeared at the head of the gangplank and gestured toward the wharf area. In a flash of blinding gold-white fire, a monstrous figure appeared—a creature utterly out of proportion with all of us. With golden skin and eyes to match, the heavily muscled cat-thing laughed aloud in a hideous voice as a grunge whirled and emptied his Ingram into it. The bullets ricocheted off in a puff of gold dust, leaving faint freckles on the creature's chest.

In return for the decoration, the lion, wearing a woman's head, playfully swatted the grunge with its right paw. When the body hit the ground and stopped rolling, its chest sagged like a broken zeppelin. The torpedoes in La Plante's employ immediately threw their weapons down and lit out for the marina clubhouse and parts beyond. I would have joined them except the conjured beastie stood between me and that possibility.

Kid Stealth, firmly gripped in his own form of battle madness, leaped over the crates he'd been using for cover and attacked the lioness. His leap carried him 15 feet into the air and 20 forward, with sickle claws glittering like stars in the night sky. The Hachi in his left hand sprayed gunfire over the left side of the human profile, then his claws hit. The metal on metal scream ripped its way through the night, then died as a feline roar of pain accompanied the gold curlicues Stealth tore out of the monster's left shoulder.

The creature dropped away from Stealth and rolled quickly to its back. Stealth retracted his claws and jumped free to avoid being caught and crushed beneath it. In doing so, however, he hung motionless in the air just long enough for the cat's right paw to bat him out toward the bay. He arced over the yacht's prow, and I heard a splash, but could not see anything to determine if he lived or died.

The creature pulled itself into a sitting position. Its tail swished back and forth, knocking the dead grunge with the flamethrower into the water. Despite wearing a woman's face, it licked at the wounds in its shoulder like a cat and briefly stemmed the flow of molten golden rivulets running down its left foreleg. When I moved



forward to put myself between it and the woman I'd rescued, its head came up, and it hissed at me in a nasty fashion that had the Old One urging me to give myself over to his control.

The sorcerer who had conjured up the creature looked down at me from the ship. "My sphinx seems to have cleared the battlefield of friend and foe alike, excepting yourself, of course." He squinted at me, then a most evil smile possessed his lips. "Is it possible you are the Wolfgang Kies mentioned as the person who took the Elf, Moira Alianha, from La Plante?"

I nodded and stood slowly without dropping my pistol. I waved both Zig and Zag back with my left hand—I knew with the sphinx between them and the sorcerer they couldn't get a shot off at him. I also knew that if the sphinx was powerful enough to kill Stealth, it would make catnip out of those two, so I didn't want them shooting it. I smiled as graciously as the Old One's nattering would allow. "You have me at a disadvantage."

The little man brought himself to attention and bowed his head. "I am Hasan al-Thani. I have been sent to obtain the woman La Plante had for us. While we had preferred the Elf, we will accept the flame-haired woman with emerald eyes."

Something about Hasan irritated me, much like the wet, sucking sound of a nasty chest wound. In midsentence his lips and words began to move out of synch, and I got the feeling that I was hearing the words more in my mind than I was with my ears. I shook my head to clear it, but between his monologue and the Old One's continued war chants, I found it impossible.

I stabbed my left hand into the air and shouted at both of them. "Hold it! Are you telling me that you want me to just hand this woman over to you so you can cart her off somewhere?"

Hasan smiled woodenly. "We do not see that you have any choice." He gestured toward the sphinx. "If you do not, we will kill you and take her anyway."

I brought the Viper around and pointed it at the unconscious girl. "So if I blow her away, you'll just leave?"

Hasan's eyes grew wide with shock, then narrowed to a more thoughtful size. "We do not believe you would do that. We call your bluff."

I dropped to one knee and triggered the remaining dozen bullets in the Viper. Spent shells rained over the wharf like cylindrical hailstones. Hasan ducked back by the sixth shot, but did not realize until later that he'd not been the target of my assault.

Stealth's shots, and those fired by the grunge, had only blown fragments of metal from the sphinx because they attacked this creature on only one level of its existence. They hit the shell it wore when summoned to the material plane. While they could damage it or even cripple it, they couldn't kill the creature itself. Even the rents Stealth had carved into it with his claws had started to heal over.

My silver bullets, I was pretty sure, could affect the monster on the metaphysical plane. Silver has magical properties that make it perfect for killing all sorts of summoned demons and things like werewolves. It's been considered sacred and necessary for countless rituals down through the ages. As the Viper's slide snapped back for the final time, I just knew I just had to be right.

I wasn't.

Sure, I'd done some damage. The sphinx had recoiled from my barrage and the silver bullets had indeed hurt it. I'd centered the shots on the face and the dozen silver projectiles had savaged the creature's nose by blowing its tip off. The sphinx's reaction was sluggish, and it appeared to lose its balance at one point, but it recovered before it could pitch over backward into the bay.

Hasan reappeared on the ship's bridge and glared at me. "You leave us no choice. Kill him."

As the sphinx got up on all four paws and stalked toward me, I realized where I'd probably gone wrong. Demons and werewolves might have had some natural aversion to silver—an allergy to it, if you like. The sphinx was not a demon or a werewolf—it was a

summoned spirit—which meant I needed something else to kill it. Being plumb out of sphinx leukemia virus, and suddenly regretting the loss of the flamethrower to the bay, I tried to remember if I had life insurance and if whoever I'd named as beneficiary really deserved the money.

"No matter," I muttered to myself as I tossed the Viper aside and backed away slowly, "the Mr. Johnsons at Kyoto-Prudential will figure my tackling this to be suicide." To kill this thing would require attacks on both the material and metaphysical planes. I toyed with the idea of letting the Old One have his way with me, but I knew I'd end up like that grunge and Kid Stealth. It had to be something magical and physical, but with a creature this size, it also had to be big.

Really big.

In fact, it had to be as big as the black coyote that materialized out of the shadows above and around me. For a half-second I thought the Old One had managed to manifest itself outside my body, but his howl of outrage at being seen in the form of a coyote quickly disabused me of that notion. The canine beast sheltering me growled in a low voice, then lunged forward at the sphinx, its ebony teeth gleaming with the light of the fire the Redwings had started.

As the two titans nipped and swatted at each other, I dove over to where the woman lay. A second or two later Zig and Zag joined me. Zig grabbed my shoulder. "Raven's here—he got Stealth's message. He said to get her out as fast as possible. He says he can't be sure how long he can hold the Sphinx back!"

I lifted the girl into Zag's arms, then told Zig the ignition sequence for the Fenris. "Get her home or to a hospital. Go, go, the car is back at the Cannery."

Zig hesitated. "Raven said to get you out of here, too. He said there's something very wrong here."

"He's got that right. Go, I'll catch up with you later." I massaged my left leg for a second, and I saw them both shudder as they recalled the last time I'd sent them away.

The street samurai vanished into the shadows, and I turned back to find Raven. Up over on top of one of the crates near the first boathouse I spotted him. Wreathed in the golden nimbus of a defensive spell, he looked magnificent. Incredibly tall, even for an Elf, he looked very much like a human because of his powerful build. His coppery skin and high cheekbones bespoke the Amerindian heritage he was likewise heir to, and the sea breezes pushed his long black hair back from his well muscled shoulders. Fists thrust into the air so he could channel more energy into the coyote he had created, he looked every bit a god.

Opposite him, now standing on the yacht's bridge, a purple glow surrounded Hasan. Sweat beaded up on his forehead and pasted his black hair against his pate. He also held his fists aloft, but I noted a tremble in his limbs that I had not seen in Raven. Hasan, powerful though he might be, was not Raven's equal in skill or magical energy. The battle would not last long.

The sphinx jumped back on its hind feet and slashed with a paw at the shadow coyote. The golden claws sliced through the canine's snout like sunlight streaking through boarded-up windows, but the wounds sealed themselves quickly enough. The coyote responded by lunging in and catching the sphinx by the throat. The attack bowled the feline over, but it managed to twist free, leaving the coyote's black teeth stained with gold.

A new surge of magical energy swept forward from the ship, making my hands and feet tingle as if I'd stepped on a live wire. The sphinx's wounds healed over immediately, and then the creature became half again larger. I shot a glance at Hasan, but instead of seeing a man crippled by the effort, he looked as if he had been rejuvenated in the process. The purple glow now stained the ship's bridge and forecastle, and Hasan stood invincible within its cocoon.

Raven's limbs quaked with the strain of sustaining the coyote. The defensive spell around him shimmered, then died because of

the lack of energy to maintain it. Raven's lips peeled back from his white teeth in an angry snarl as he redoubled his effort. The tremors in his limbs ceased, but the pain on his face told me he would not be able to last for long.

I have to do something. I'd tossed down the Viper, so I looked for any weapon I could find to let me shoot Hasan. Strictly speaking, it was not good form to shoot a sorcerer battling another sorcerer, but I'd rather have Raven angry with me for a breach of honor than have to bury my friend. I spotted and scooped up my MP-9 and cocked it.

Recalling the special loads Stealth had made, I drew a bead on Hasan. *The silver should get the bullets through the spell, eventually, then the mercury loads will do him. Something for magic, and something for flesh.*

It hit me like a virus wasting a database. I shifted aim and squeezed the trigger. As soon as I burned that clip, I jammed another home and let it rip. *Something for magic and something for flesh, especially if it's gold flesh! Poor pussycat.*

The mercury loads in the silver bullets bonded instantly with the gold of the Sphinx's flesh. The silver bullets themselves did their stuff on the ethereal portion of the creature. The result manifested itself in a bizarre display of feline leprosy. Silvery gobbets of demon-cat splashed to the wharf. The beast whirled to snarl at me, and I let a burst go that ate away half its lower jaw.

The coyote hit it hard on the left flank. The sphinx twisted back, but its hind right leg gave along a line I'd scored with several shots, crashing the beast down on the docks. I directed a stream of fire at its spine, burrowing in just at the base of its neck, while the coyote distracted it with lunges and feints. Once my fire severed its spine, the creature lay still for a moment, then evaporated into a mist.

I ran over to Raven as the coyote likewise disintegrated. Raven had slumped to his knees on the crate and held himself up from total collapse on his hands. His chest heaved, and the black curtain of his hair hid his face from me. Sweat glistened on his arms and shoulders, and I saw droplets stain the wooden crate.

I reached over and squeezed his left shoulder in congratulations. "We got him, Doc. We got his demon."

Raven shook his head and looked down at me. "He's not defeated yet." He pointed back at the yacht, purple highlights being etched onto his face by the glow still surrounding Hasan. "He's getting an energy boost from the ship. It's an allied spirit of incredible power, and it's using him as a conduit. Whatever summoned it must have been unbelievable."

The same voice I'd heard Hasan use before now burst into my brain without using the sham of having the man's lips move. "It is true, Richard Raven, what summoned me was beyond your mortal ken. You have interfered with the mission my master has sent me on, and now you must pay! But first, you will see this one of your friends die because I relish the pain it will cause you!"

I felt magical force begin to gather around me, then tighten like a chain wrapped around my chest. It crushed in from all sides, and I wanted to scream, but I could get no air from my lungs. I wanted to beg Raven to destroy the ship, but I realized that was impossible. *How do you kill a 60-foot-long allied spirit?*

The burning agony drove me to my knees. The Old One howled in pain and fought to win my release, but even it was helpless against the power that held and crushed me. Sparks began to float before my eyes, then great shimmering balls of light sizzled across my field of vision.

I knew the end had come.

I felt certain the explosion I heard was my heart bursting, and the sudden cessation of pain only meant I'd died. I could smell death in the air, and I recall having been disappointed that it did not smell differently when it came for me. I waited for the blackness to steal my sight, but it did not. In fact, the light grew brighter, and I laughed that death was not so dark and grim after all.

Then I realized I'd heard myself laugh.

That meant I wasn't dead.

I scrambled to my feet just in time to have a second, larger explosion blast me back into the boathouse wall. Whereas the first explosion had only

torn a small hole at the base of the ship's superstructure, the greater blast punched fire out through all the portholes below the main deck and pulsed a flaming corona out over the deck itself. Then the whole superstructure lurched to port and dropped down a deck level. The ship listed to port and started to take on great floods of water.

High on the superstructure the purple glow imploded. A column of fire whirled up into the air, and Hasan combusted instantaneously. I saw his skeleton outlined in black against the golden fire, then it too vanished.

The ship screamed, then sank from sight in a steaming caldron of bubbles.

By the time Doc Raven helped me to my feet and we both picked our way through flaming debris to the edge of the wharf, Stealth had managed to awkwardly haul himself up out of the water. His left arm hung limply from his shoulder and showed where most of the working parts had been crushed when the Sphinx had batted him out of the air. Water poured from the open compartments in which he carried plastic explosives, and his talons gouged their way into the decking to steady him.

Raven and I exchanged warm smiles, while Stealth turned and nodded grimly at the burning allied spirit. "Underwater I could see no props or jet nozzles—the ship had no natural way to move. I figured that made it very special; therefore, I resolved to destroy it. Then a grunge corpse strapped to a flamethrower drifted down from the surface, so I improvised a bomb. Not much can stand up to napalm and semitek."

His mention of the flamethrower brought my earlier encounter with it back to mind in full sizzling detail. I shifted my shoulders around to ease the soreness in my back. "By the way, that was pretty tricky shooting you did when that grunge popped up with the torch gun."

Stealth nodded solemnly. "He was half hidden, so I couldn't go for a head shot. A body shot would have ruptured the tank, and that would have roasted you alive." He shuddered and glanced at his tattered left arm. "Burning to death is not something I'd wish on anyone."

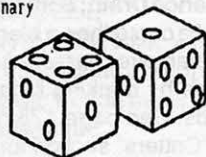
I turned to Raven. "You should have seen it. He nailed me in the back and knocked me forward into the woman I was trying to save. That blasted us out of the way of the flamethrower." I looked back at Stealth. "It's a good thing you remembered I was wearing kevlar."

The look of surprise on his face took a second or two to die. I felt a chill pass between us, but it drained away as Kid Stealth punched me lightly in the shoulder and gave me a genuine smile. "Yeah, I'm glad I remembered, too." Ω



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The Quick and the Undead

Playing a Vampire PC

Lester W. Smith

Vampires in *Shadowrun* are relegated to the roles of NPCs—for a number of good reasons. On the one hand, it is difficult for other archetypes to compete on an equal

basis with a creature which can assume mist form and slip through the thinnest crevice and whose regenerative powers heal wounds virtually as quickly as they are received. On the other hand, it is tough for a vampire PC to interact reasonably with other PCs, whom it cannot help but view as potential meals, and who view it with fear, loathing, and hatred. But the quick and deadly vampire, with its legendary cunning and suavity, fits the *Shadowrun* ambiance so well that it almost begs to be played as a PC. The purpose of this article, then, is to provide rules and guidelines for running a Vampire archetype.

In some places, this article summarizes rules from the *Shadowrun* rulebook or refers players and referees to specific pages of that book. In others, it interprets the official *Shadowrun* rules, fleshing them out with added detail. But in no way does it contradict the official rules; it is compatible with all *Shadowrun* material published thus far.

Perhaps the best way to comprehend the material in this article is to first look over the Vampire archetype sheet, then read the material below.

SPECIAL POWERS

Enhanced Senses: A vampire has superior abilities of hearing and smell. Exact effects are left to the referee to decide, but it is suggested that a vampire PC be treated as having the equivalent of canine hearing and smell.

Essence Drain: Some might consider this more of a curse than a blessing, but with this power, vampire characters can increase their Essence by drinking blood from other humanoids. See page 176 of the *Shadowrun* rules' "Critters" section for details.

Immunity to Age: A vampire character simply never ages, and consequently never becomes enfeebled by age.

Immunity to Pathogens: When resisting infections or diseases, a vampire PC gets a

number of automatic successes equal to two times its current Essence rating.

Immunity to Poisons: When resisting the effects of poisons, a vampire PC gets a number of automatic successes equal to two times its current Essence rating.

Infection: A vampire can infect other humanoids with vampirism. See page 177 of the "Critters" section for details.

Mist Form: A vampire PC can control its molecular cohesion to change to and from a mist. This change takes one action. In this form, the vampire can pass through any space that a bacterium or virus could fit through. As well, a vampire in mist form gains Immunity to Normal Weapons (see page 176 of the "Critters" section for details), including those to which it is normally vulnerable (see Vulnerability, below). Magic and sunlight will affect a misted vampire normally, however, the latter returning it to corporeal form instantaneously. Also, a vampire that becomes unconscious in mist form automatically reverts to its normal form.

Vampires in mist form are denser than air, which means they will tend to settle to the ground (or floor, or whatever). They can, however, flow upward along any solid surface as long as contact with that surface is maintained. Referees are encouraged to make their own rulings about unusual circumstances such as climbing in heavy winds, moving in vehicles that are accelerating at high-G, and the like.

Regeneration: A vampire is incredibly difficult to kill. If such a being takes a Deadly wound or reaches Unconscious on the Physical side of the Condition Monitor, roll 1D6, and the creature dies on a roll of 1 (1 or 2 if the damage is from fire, explosives, or other things that affect a major portion of the body). All other damage disappears at the end of each combat turn.

Thermographic Vision: Vampires are able to see in the infrared spectrum as well as dwarves and trolls do.

WEAKNESSES

Allergy (Sunlight, Severe): For PC vampires, the PC allergy rules apply more reasonably than those for critter allergies. The PC takes a Light wound when first exposed to sunlight, with an additional Light wound every three minutes (Body=3) thereafter. Also, these wounds are not subject to the effects of regeneration until contact with sunlight is terminated. It is suggested that the referee treat these wounds as regenerating at the same rate at which they were incurred, although the *Shadowrun* rules are not specific in this regard.

For example, a vampire PC becomes unconscious after 27 minutes of exposure to sunlight, rolling for a 1 in 6 chance of death at that time and every three minutes thereafter. The PC would require 30 minutes out of the sunlight to regenerate these wounds completely.

Induced Dormancy (Lack of Air): The

Shadowrun rules do not explain this weakness (as far as I can tell). I suggest that whenever a vampire PC is deprived of air it suffer one point of stun damage every three minutes, in much the same way as it suffers wounds upon exposure to sunlight. Once the vampire reaches unconsciousness, it takes no further stun. But it cannot recover until exposed to air once again, at which time it recovers immediately.

Essence Loss: Vampires have no Essence of their own; they must take it from other creatures (see Essence Drain above), and they lose one point of that borrowed Essence each month. At Essence 0, a vampire can live for three days (one per point of Body) before dying permanently. The maximum Essence a vampire can attain is 12. Note that a vampire's Strength attribute varies with its Essence rating. A vampire's Strength is equal to its "birth" Strength (which is the same as the original human it was) plus its Essence.

Vulnerability (Wood): When used against vampires, wooden weapons are treated as having a wound category one step higher than normal. Simple contact with wood affects vampires as a Nuisance Allergy (it just annoys them). Note that wounds incurred by wooden weapons are subject to Regeneration (see above) in the same way as other wounds.

Other Weaknesses: First, a vampire simply cannot digest normal food and drink, only blood. Ingesting anything but blood causes nausea and vomiting within minutes. It is suggested that the referee have a vampire character who has ingested normal food or drink make a Body Attribute check, Arduous level, every minute to avoid vomiting. One success means it holds the stuff down; two or more successes means it is able to hide its discomfort as well. These rules can also be applied to abnormal food or drink (kerosene and styrofoam packing, for example).

Second, vampires are denser than humans and have a harder time staying afloat in liquids. (Even when in mist form, a vampire is heavier than water.) To reflect this, vampire characters should add 3 to their Target Numbers for Swimming checks. Note that failure results in loss of air, which begins to induce Dormancy.

REFEREEING A VAMPIRE

Vampires in *Shadowrun* are powerful creatures with superhuman abilities. Fortunately for purposes of play, they also have very serious weaknesses. One way of keeping a vampire PC in check—of balancing it somewhat with other PCs—is to play up those weaknesses. The primary weakness is a vampire's need for secrecy. Face it, as powerful as vampires are, humans simply have to destroy them whenever possible to keep from being reduced to a servitor race for vampire masters. Thus, a vampire PC will seek to disguise its true nature to pass itself off as something other than what it truly is.

Your job as referee is to make that task difficult by realistically taking advantage of the

creature's weaknesses. This doesn't mean that you should go out of your way to hassle the player, but you should do such things as:

- Give other party members an occasional roll to notice that their friend never eats or drinks in their presence.

- Leave the burden of avoiding daylight meetings completely to the vampire player.

- If other party members see the vampire PC assume mist form or heal itself of wounds, give them an occasional chance to recognize these things as vampiric powers rather than spell effects, to represent the fact that the PCs might stumble across information somewhere that would make them suspicious.

On the other hand, just because your players know the *Shadowrun* rules backward and forward and can spot a vampire a mile away, don't let their characters act on that knowledge until they somehow make the discovery themselves. Of course, in any roleplaying campaign, it is always a good idea for referees to include powers and effects not in the official rules, in order to keep the players guessing and make the game world seem bigger than the rulebook and full of mystery. If you are in the habit of doing this, a vampire PC will have a somewhat easier time convincing the other PCs that he is some sort of specialized magician. And maybe, if the vampire PC works with them long enough and is compelling enough, by the time the other PCs discover the vampire's secret, they will have become such friends that they won't destroy it out of hand.

PLAYING A VAMPIRE

Your character has a great deal of power, but it is so outnumbered by living—as opposed to undead—beings that it remains very vulnerable to destruction. And if those beings discover your character's true nature, they will have little choice but to destroy you. To allow a vampire to exist is to risk vampires taking over the entire world. As well, there is little love lost between individual vampires, as they tend to be solitary creatures who perceive others of their kind as competitors for food and threats to their own secret existence.

Because your character is a player character, rather than a monstrous opponent to PCs, it is assumed that he retains enough humanity to want to live like a human as much as possible. Shadowrunning allows such a creature a chance to use his special abilities in ways that will provide the money necessary to keep up the pretense. If he is careful enough and loyal enough to the other PCs, he might eventually be able to let them in on his awful secret.

Until that time, however, he must be extremely careful to convince them that he is something other than a vampire. There are two major problems involved with this, however. The first is the vampire's allergy to sunlight. That would be easy enough to explain away if he were truly metahuman,

PUNK VAMPIRE ARCHETYPE

"So you don't see any chrome on me. Don't let that fool you, chummer. There are augmentations, and then there are augmentations. I can do the job, whatever it is, better than you'd expect. But just don't watch over my shoulder; I don't appreciate scrutiny. When people get too nosy, bad things start to happen to them."

"You won't get a better price. So why not give me a shot? I'll deliver."

Commentary: Just weeks ago, this character was a normal citizen (well, at least as normal as they come in 21st-century Seattle). Then she met up with one of the undead, and after draining her of Essence, that old vampire left her to rise to unlife herself—it may have been a sudden streak of mercy, or maybe it was cruelty. Now, the new vampire must learn to survive on the streets.

But being so recently alive, this vampire seeks to retain some semblance of normalcy, to maintain contact with humans as something other than a predator. Her newly acquired powers can help in this respect, but one wrong move will reveal her nature to the living, calling their wrath down upon her. It is a dangerous game she plays, but at least it makes her feel alive.

Attributes:

Body: 3
Quickness: 12
Strength: 3+Essence
Charisma: 4
Intelligence: 3
Willpower: 3
Essence: Variable
Magic: 6
Reaction: 5

Skills:

Etiquette (Street): 4
Conjuring: 1
Magical Theory: 3
Sorcery: 3
Stealth: 5
Unarmed Combat: 4

Cyberware:

None

Contacts:

None

Gear:

Knife
Ordinary Clothing
Plastic Restraints

Spells:

Invisibility: 5



A vampire player character has a number of special powers and weaknesses.

Powers: Enhanced Senses (Hearing and Smell), Essence Drain, Immunity to Age, Immunity (Pathogens, Poisons, and Infection), Regeneration, Thermographic Vision.

Weaknesses: Allergy (Sunlight; Severe), Induced Dormancy (Lack of Air), Essence Loss, Vulnerability (Wood), Inability to Digest Food and Drink, +3 to Target Numbers for Swimming.

but in all ways he appears to be human. It is up to the player to come up with some sort of story to account for his allergy or to disguise it, but that is part of the fun to playing a vampire. The second major problem is explaining away the vampire's special powers. Most likely, he will claim to be some sort of specialist mage or shaman, but the story must be convincing.

A third, less serious, problem involved in disguising the vampire's nature is his need for blood to keep up his Essence, and his inability to keep other food or drink down. Hunting for blood can be worked out sepa-

ately with the referee, rather than including it in the normal events of an evening's play, and the player may be able to pass off his refusal to eat or drink as some sort of a vow not to do so in public.

As a final note, remember that like a man-eating tiger, the vampire is both the hunter and the hunted. Even if the other PCs come to recognize him for what he is and still remain friends, the rest of the world will always be his enemy. If shadowrunners live on the edge, then, vampire shadowrunners live on the veriest, thinnest edge of that edge. There is simply no room for a misstep. ☐



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