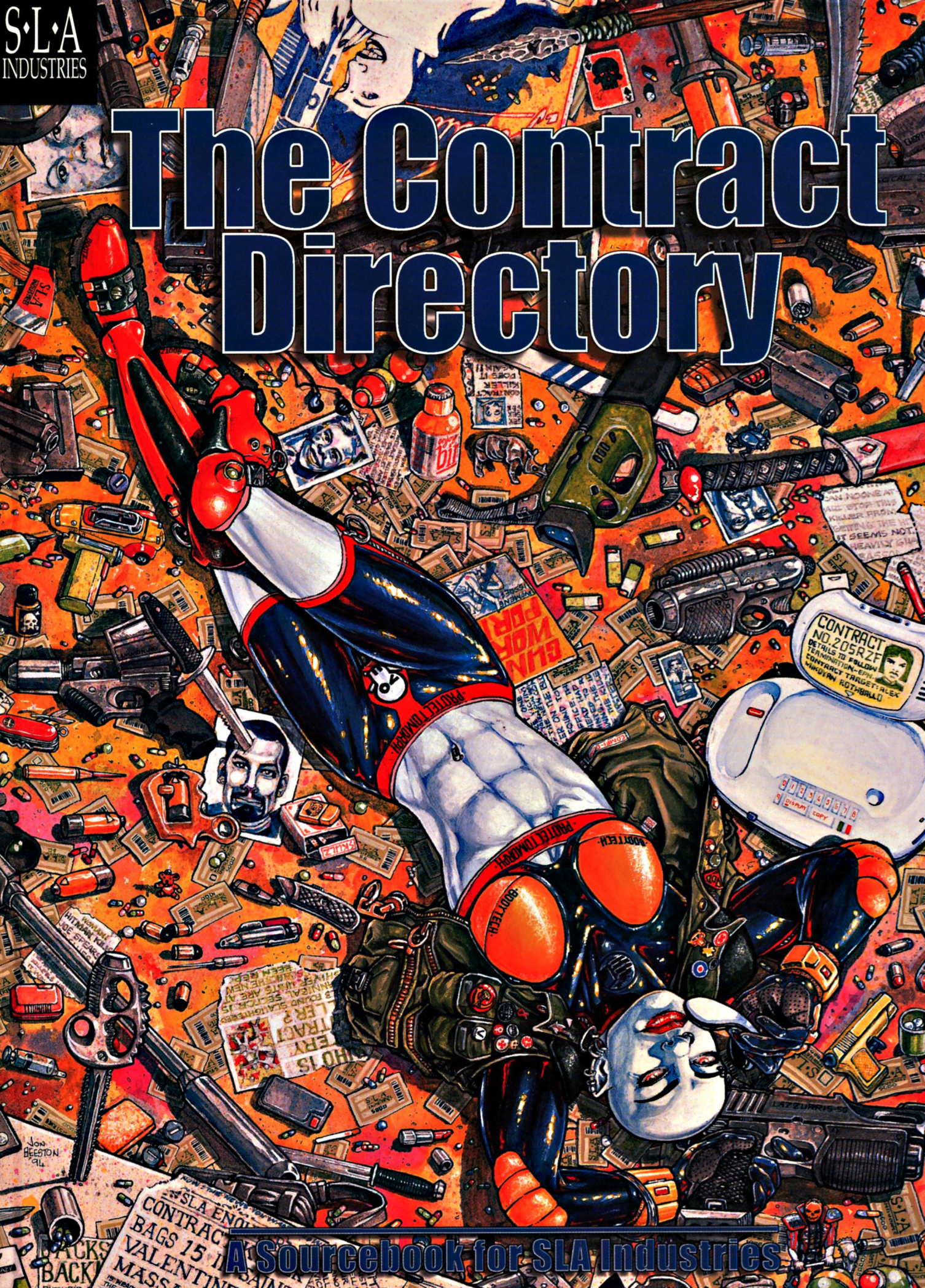




SLA
INDUSTRIES

The Contract Directory

A Sourcebook for SLA Industries

The room was thin and towered on up, wound in and around on itself like toffee on a stick. It curled on up into the darkness, faint glints of light in the distance betraying the presence of watchers in the tunnels that spiralled off at irregular intervals. The walls might have been stone, or plastic, or solidified agony, crazed outlines of various beings burnt into it. If you looked carefully, you might see the outlines move around, swimming about on the surface. The girl tried not to watch them, concentrating on the twisted figure in front of her. It wasn't as if she could do anything for them.

"It's inconvenient, of course. I suppose that's part of the fun, though. I don't think either of us would want it to be easy."

She tried to remember what he was talking about. How long had she been listening? Moments? Weeks? It wasn't easy to be sure. "Of course not," she said, trying to sound placatory, observing his mood carefully. He didn't even seem to notice.

"He's such a boring wanker. I don't think I'd be so bitter about it if he wasn't so fucking uptight, and you can tell him that from me next time you go back." He suddenly leapt up, contorted with fury and loathing, face towards the distant skies. "DO YOU HEAR ME? YOU'RE AN ARSEHOLE!" Rage poured out on his voice, twisting the room around it. 'Arsehole', moaned the wind quietly. Gone as quickly as it appeared, the rage lifted, and he sank back to the floor; aggression evaporated.

The girl sighed to herself, and waited patiently. He sprung up again almost at once, looking mischievous. "There's something going on, though. Do you feel it? Something new, not him, not here? No, of course you don't. You're not even real. This is, though."

His face contorted, mouth drawn back in a snarl, a wild gleam in his eye. She knew the expression, and was already getting up before he growled "Go." Spikes punched through his chest, blood running from the wounds, and his hands began to deform. She started running, flat out before she even got to the tunnel.

Bright, white light erupted behind her; a sickly arc-light glare, but by the time it reached her, she had already gone.

The Contract Directory

A Sourcebook for SLA Industries

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The Contract Directory was produced on an Apple Macintosh G4 using Quark XPress, Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Acrobat, all under Mac OS X and Mac OS 9.1. Hardcore toolz for a hardcore task. Respect.

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LIFE AS A KILLER

"You want my advice? You plan ahead, set some goals. Say where you want to be by when and then write down how you're going to get there. You don't have to fight everyone who challenges you, you don't have to risk your life trying to rush it. Keep training, keep working on your appearance, believe in yourself. Don't waste time on beating yourself up if you lose a fight, just get on with it. Most important of all, find a good Agent before you sign more than a year of your life away with anyone. Ruttan's a pro and he only takes the best-me. See you all later in the Arena."

Johnny Automatic interviewed on Circuit: Global by Jaspar Hart, SD904.

THE CONTRACT KILLER LIFESTYLE

The greatest superstars in the World of Progress. Corporate whores. Mindless murderers set loose on each other as damage limitation. Cloak Division's sanctioned assassins. Fools looking for a quick path to fame and glory. SLA's elite gladiators.

Views on Contract Killers vary widely. Psychologically exempt from normal duties, they are channelled into the Contract Circuit, where their unique derangements can be put to best use. Whether a Killer is locked in a life-and-death battle, promoting her sponsor's goods, tracking down wanted criminals as part of a Hunter Sheet, giving an interview or hitting the party life, she's on view for her adoring public 24/7.

Except, of course, for the times that aren't filmed. The secret missions that her sponsors demand. The assignments that SLA passes down on the quiet. The various bits of 'work' deemed too dirty, dangerous or violent to be passed out to Operatives or Shivers. Life - and death - on the Contract Circuit isn't all it's scratched up to be.

VIEWS ON THE CONTRACT CIRCUIT

"My earliest dream was to walk the halls of the Contract Circuit as a Killer. To be a hero and to stand alone amongst the strongest and most vicious warriors in the World of Progress. It was my destiny. It is the path I walk."

Diceman talks to the children during a Circulation Channel interview, SD903.

"Well, this afternoon, after my training, I'll be posing for Hannibal Leisurewear, then showing the cameras how comfortable Boingaloing Jogging Shoes have become since the latest innovations, then Gargantua Games are buying me dinner-think they want to make a computer game about me, dunno if that's good for my image, those games go out of fashion so damn



fast. Later I'll be at the Pit to dance the night away, so if you want some photos, you can get them then. I'll have my choice of Clown Fabrics(tm) costumes, so it should be a good show. Tomorrow? No, tomorrow I'm opening a new funfair off-planet. Maybe next week-ask my Agent."

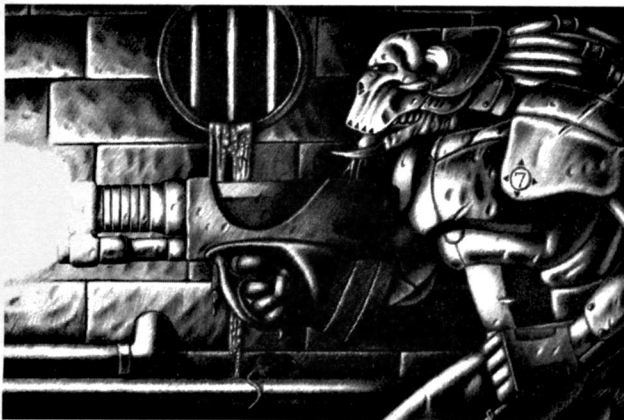
Top Notch on the phone to an Uptown Circuit fight booker, SD904.

"One day I was walking along, minding my own business, thinking about whether to fight Pig Man or not, when all of a sudden this bullet rips into me. The next thing I know, I'm in an LAD bed and a month has gone by. I tell you, it was a bit of a shock. I never noticed the Pig's target mark on the pavement. You've gotta be careful, believe me. Covert games are a bitch."

The Funster, giving a lecture to Meny University hopefuls.

"Our SCL doesn't mean shit any more. There are fines for learning anything. We can't query a direct order without risking execution. You realise that they've stitched us up, don't you mate? On top of all that, they won't even tell us how many people we're facing on this 'little Operation'. I tried to get some 3rd Eye archive records on this 'Fire' thing, but I can't even get into the Soft Company briefing notes any more. We're well and truly fucked."

3rd Eye voice recording of The Raven (deceased), in conversation with Carnage, 904SD. Not for broadcast.



DANGLING THE APPLE

"The fame, the riches, the flash car and the millions of fans-it's everything I ever wanted and it's just getting better and better. Believe me kids, if you want to live dangerously, if you want to walk on the edge, you pick up your Mum and Dad's kitchen knives and start practising right now. Slice 'em and dice 'em!"

Diceman talks to the children during a Circulation Channel interview, SD903.

What you want to do with your life depends on your self-confidence and vision. For those with plenty of both, the most

tempting dream is surely to be a top Contract Killer. Standing alone in the ring against the likes of Deity and Video Nasty, billions of fans showering you with honours and adoration, millions of creds pouring into your account. Thousands of other Killers bow at your feet, and the World of Progress resounds with your name. You are a hero, you have made it to the top. Congratulations.

The money can be excellent, but for many Contract Killers, the money is not as important as the fame. The World of Progress consists of many billions of vid screens. A large proportion of these are switched to the Contract Circuit, where the mighty champions defeat all-comers in the arenas and the blood flows free. Huge audiences watch live fights between infamous warriors. Some of these are gladiatorial arena contests in which excitement levels reach fever-pitch and even some of the live audience might take part. Others feature the sudden, unexpected violence of the street Circuit, where any part of Downtown might suddenly become a battle zone. A few are covert games, where one Killer is unwittingly stalked by another. Still more contests take place at special venues across the World of Progress, in specially prepared vid events like Gorezone, or at impromptu venues. Wherever the action takes place, millions of fans scream their appreciation from audience enclosures, gambling shops and streetside viewpoints. Billions more watch through the vid screens, choosing their favourite fights, seeing the edited highlights later and then going out and buying the t-shirts, cuddly toys, posters and other doobries. The World of Progress is hooked to the Contract Circuit and its popularity can only increase as the variety of tournaments expands and the number of Killers grows.

Third Eye News carefully monitors the action and concentrates its attention on the most exciting contests. You don't have to be famous to appear on the vids, but you have to be able to show the crowd that you're something special, someone unique. You have to sell yourself to make them remember you. Without that special something, it doesn't matter how good at breaking someone's limbs you are, or how talented with a chainaxe. To be noticed, you have to have style. The Bookies and the Agents want someone who is going to attract the big sponsorship deals and who is going to look good in front of a camera. If you haven't got what it takes, you'd better stay out of the big league.

THE REALITY

Everyone wants to be a Killer.. The freedom and power of exemption, the lure of easy money and instant fame, the glamour and style, surely it is the greatest thing in the world to have those things?

Not quite.

You can be killed, at any time, by any of your peers, and never will there be a reason for it other than the public demanded it. All those faceless masses, deciding your fate at the hands of the person wearing the last face you'll ever see.

It's the way of the game. You have no allies in the Circuit. You have no friends. Well, you might have friends, but that just makes it worse, because you'd better bloody well keep them quiet, or you can guarantee that the friend will be the one paid to put the bullet in your back - tragedy like that sells almost as well as sex - and there aren't many of them who could refuse to do the deed. It is a vicious fact of life that the world of the Contract Killer is a solitary one.

There is no space for anything except number one - no family, no people close to you, nothing. In this business, they're just a liability, a weakness, anything that you care about is just leverage, another vulnerability to be used and abused. You can't afford that. You can never afford that. Because you need to survive, to climb the ladder to the top... and to make sure that there isn't anything to drag you down.

Out on the street, there are few rules, but lots of opportunities. You could have to fight at any time. You might get a moment or two to reach for your sword and indulge in a little dramatic banter, but then again you may not even know an attack is coming. In the arenas and special venues, the greatest Killers in the World of Progress are in your backyard, all of them willing and able to kill you if someone tells them to.

Everyone starts out on the street, and if you're good enough, you'll be noticed - or you'll make someone notice you. When that happens - if that happens - you'll be placed on the main Circuit. If you can make it there, set your foot on the next rung of the ladder, your path is set for life, and you'll be master of your own destiny. Now, do you really believe that? Do you think that after all that struggle, all that death you've seen and dealt, you'll be the one making the decisions? Wrong again.

All Killers have two things that they must obey - their Sponsors, and SLA Industries. If a sponsor says jump, you say how high. If SLA says jump, you make damn sure you know how far to go without asking. Refusal in either case will end your career - and your heartbeat - very quickly.

Now, how does that power feel? Are you enjoying it yet?

Your Sponsors have a list of things for you to do from day one. Not all of them will be glamorous, and very few are likely to be pleasant. You go where they tell you, when they tell you. You kill what they point at. You take a dive when you're told to. You do all this for the princely sum of a few hundred credits a week - oh, and some free or discounted stock, if you're lucky.

Sure, the day will come when you're a big name on the Circuit, but even then there are always other big names too... and SLA made them all. It'll break you if you get balky, no matter how many billions of teenagers daydream about you. At the end of the day, Operatives still have higher clearance than you, and as much as you'd like to off them, it's against the rules.

You see, there's not as much glitter as you saw on the TV. It all washes off, with the blood, in the rain. Welcome to the real world, the World of Progress. The world of the Contract Killer. It doesn't get any better than this.

GETTING INTO THE CIRCUIT

Contract Killers are mad. That's not meant figuratively; it's literal. The first requirement for entering the Contract Circuit is a Psychological Examination and Evaluation Exemption Certificate from the Department of Psychology and Psychosis. Interviews can be arranged by direct application, or from any sponsoring Department within SLA Industries that has close connections with the potential Contract Killer. The good doctors at the Bethlehem Institute only test company employees though, so you need to be working for SLA - and you need to have at least some skill in combat.

"We don't need to test him. We know he's whacked! Anyone who wants to be a CK has to have something seriously wrong with them. No, really, I mean they have to. Comforting isn't it?"

Dr. Wolfgang Wierman, SCL 7A, Consulting Physician, Department of Psychology and Psychosis, on Glenn 'Carnage' Berry.

The program started as a way of finding useful work for employees - particularly Ops - driven mad by the stresses of the job. All that training was far too expensive to waste. Ops psychologically classified as 'Killers' were exempted from BPNs, locked out of the company's data archives, and set to work on high-violence missions. Fights regularly broke out between enemies, and made headline news. Particularly violent Killers became notorious, and the media machine took over. Companies agreed to issue contract sponsorships to Killers, and the modern Contract Killer was born. That doesn't mean that the old structures have vanished. They're hidden by the media, not discussed outside of the business, but they're still there.

Once you have your all-important exemption certificate, you have to get yourself an agent or specialist financier. Unless you're already famous, you'll be taken on by one of the sanctioned 'New Talent' agencies, who will arrange a low-end sponsorship deal for you, but it's a start. You can move on up as your reputation grows and your agent sells your contract to someone better-placed to exploit you.

Then it's off to Third Eye. Here your SCL restriction is put in place - SLA reason that because you are dangerously mentally ill, you are not trustworthy - and your SCL is reduced to 11 for access to information. You will be fitted with a subcutaneous Telemetry Device (known as a 'tracker'), allowing Third Eye to get a fix on you anywhere on Mort. The tracker is an essential tool of the trade, allowing Third Eye to trace you with any of their remote cameras or mobile camera teams, as well as get a general

readout of most of your vital signs. Once it's in place, you're free to start life on the Circuit by obeying your sponsor's every whim.

"This tracker is your life line. Take it off and you don't exist. Remember this, it's important. If it ain't on camera, it hasn't happened. That's Hunter Sheets too, 'less you get a head. Think about that. You'll need to make that work for you rather than against you. Hey! You listening?"

Ramirez 'Ginger' Ramone, Third Eye Technician, fitting a tracker to a newly signed Contract Killer

WORKING THE SYSTEM

The Circuit provides unique demands, restrictions and opportunities. Many Contract Killers, find themselves feeling like outsiders from the rest of the company. The pressures are different to those of the cycle of Crib-BPN-relax. Learning to work the system is the mark of a real pro. Killing is easy. Living the life is harder.

Killers are classified as being within the SCL system for chain of command purposes only. SCL awards are hard to come by on the Circuit, and mean less against the tapestry of visibility, style, sponsorship and reputation that get you moving up the ladder. Contract Killers do not concern themselves with digging the dirt. They know better than any that information on a need to know basis means they don't need to know. SLA further reinforces this through Knowledge Fines, making sure that Killers do not put their noses where they're not wanted. Any Killer accidentally or intentionally learning a piece of classified information is automatically fined according to the SCL restriction of the material - 100c at SCL10, and doubling with each increase from 200c at SCL9 to 51,200c at SCL1. Complex or lengthy material may count as more than one 'piece' of information, too.

"Look, asshole, I don't know and I don't want to know. You can keep it to yourself, or you can talk to my ChainAxe. You dig?"

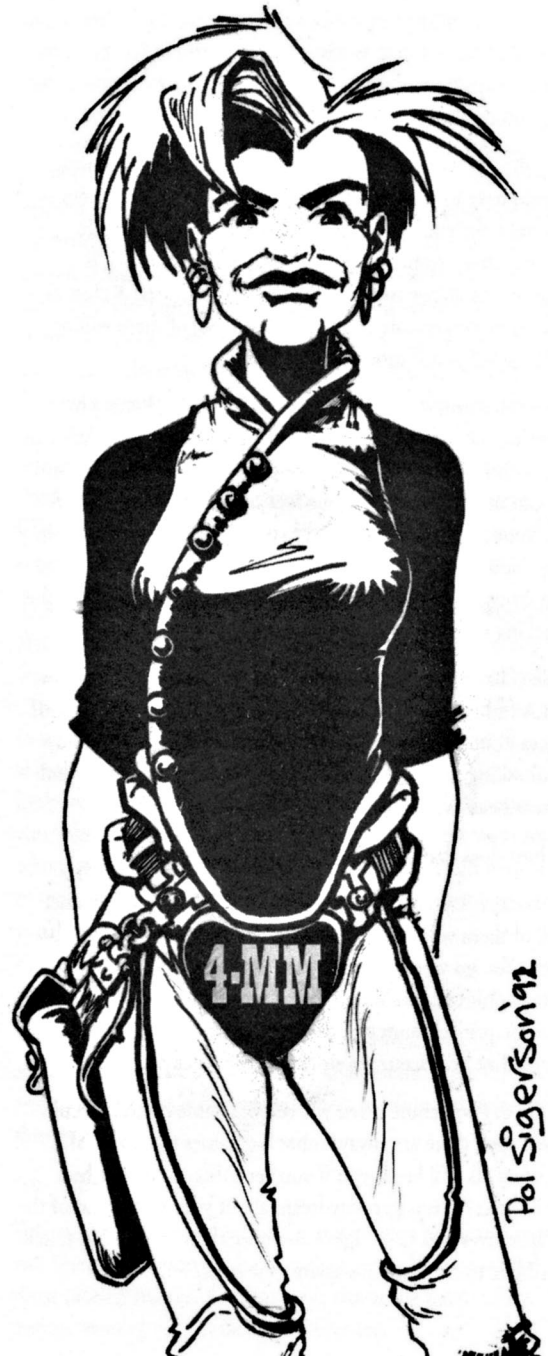
Frosty, Contract Killer, to Operative Squad BugJam (on a Red BPN in the same Mall as Frosty's doll-signing session)

Instead of BPN's, Contract Killers can do useful work between Circuit appearances by filling Hunter Sheets. These detail potential targets to be tracked down and eliminated - targets either too dangerous, too visible or too trivial to be worth issuing a Grey BPN for. Each Hunter Sheet has a value, which is paid when someone fills them by providing proof that the target has been eradicated. The value varies wildly according to the difficulty of the assignment and how badly the sponsor wants the target dead. Hunter Sheets are publicly declared and left open until filled, so it's not unknown for several different Killers to all go after the same target.

Credits are mainly earned through Circuit Games though. Payment increases as your reputation grows, and is keyed to the game you get involved in. A tame 20-way arena fight to first

blood pays a whole lot less than fighting to the death one on one against a superior Killer. All the details are handled by your agent, so if you're a new nobody, you're unlikely to get onto many shows. The Street Circuit is open to all - well, anyone able to wander around Downtown looking for other Killers to attack, anyway - and you get paid an appearance fee any time you fight out there, so it's a good way to get started.

Your Sponsors will have plenty for you to do as well. They'll arrange promotional events for you, pressing the flesh of fans and



employees, pushing the merchandise, working the 'celebrity fringe' of the Circuit. They'll also send you off to do their dirty work, but that's another matter. Your forced grin on a school visit boosts their ratings, gets you noticed, and can lead to better match-ups in the games and better sponsors. A lot of Contract Killers hate the PR more than the killing, but it's not optional.

REPUTATIONS

Bookies, Agents and Talent Scouts are all looking for that indefinable 'special quality' which sparkles around certain people. They also keep a wise eye on every Killer's progress, with each fight won or lost becoming a new factor to work into your overall status.

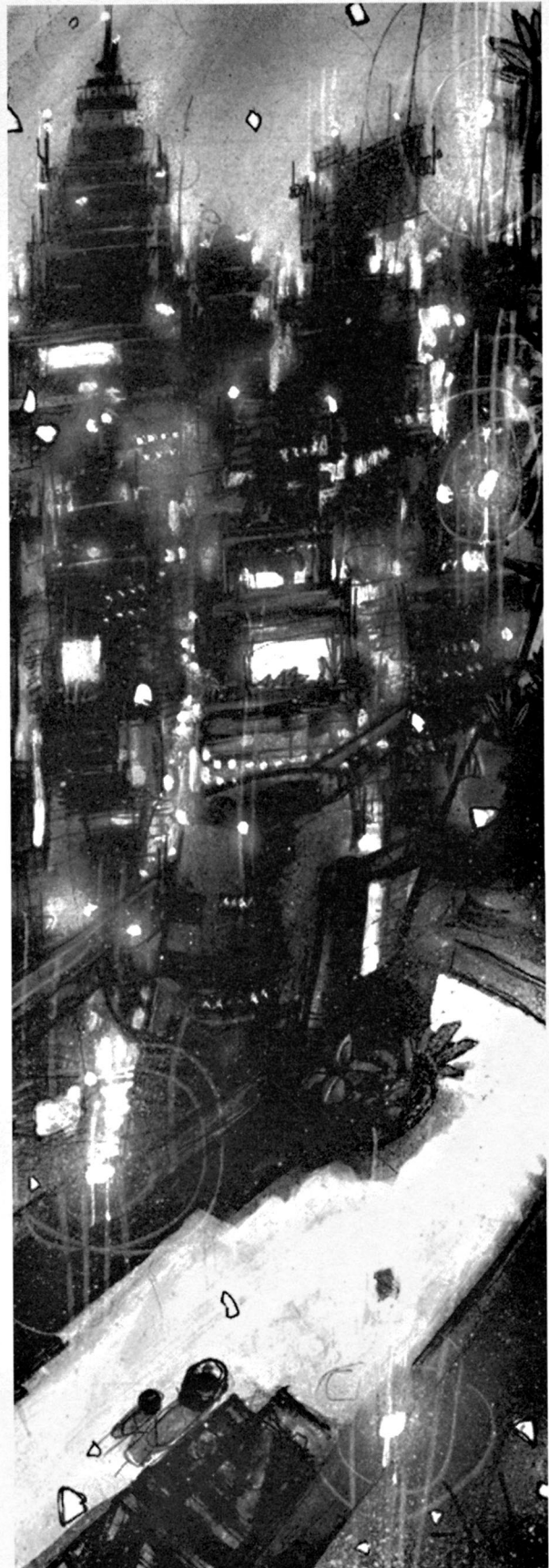
After a while, the pundits might start comparing you with a better class of Killer. You'll find yourself going up against contenders who previously would have kicked your ass, but you now feel ready for. It's a long, hard slog for most Killers, but those who survive achieve nigh-on godlike status. A miserable little Downtown nobody would never even dream of facing Mr. Consequence or Top Notch, as they know that these mighty heroes would take them out with no more effort than that used to raise a scornful eyebrow.

It's all a matter of status and of reputation - if people know you rip arms out of sockets whenever you enter the ring, they get the message: 'avoid'. If they know you've lost your last ten fights, they think "ripe for slaughter". Your Reputation, or Rep, is a measure your aura of power, public support and ability.

Your Rep is your most important possession on the Circuit. It reflects your ranking on the Circuit's ladders, increases the amount you earn for appearances, makes new sponsors and agents available, inflates your air-time, and makes life better all round. It also greatly awes lesser Killers - any Killer fighting someone with a higher Rep is going to be at a great disadvantage. As an official ranking, Rep starts out at rock bottom - rank 1 - and is won and lost through the bouts you fight and the challenges you accept... and it has to be maintained. If you stop fighting and working out, you'll vanish into obscurity quicker than last week's new trends.

"You see them quiver in their boots when they realise you're not bothered that they've got swords and chainaxes and you're unarmed. They thought they'd be OK beforehand, but get them in the Hunt and they start to crumble. Sometimes I wait for them to come to me, but most of the time I take them out one-by-one, let the others sweat a bit before I rip their throats out with my teeth, make funny shapes with their internal organs and then photograph my artwork. [Giggle] I just can't seem to help myself."

Kansa, interviewed on Circuit: Global.



THE MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

"You make us look good, we make you rich.
Do we have a deal?"

Alan Charter, head-hunter for FEN's Sponsorship and
Advertising division.

There's no way around it – you need to be sponsored to become a Contract Killer, and you will be followed by Third Eye no matter what you're doing or where you go. Most Killers make the bread and butter of their living from sponsorship deals, so they are extremely important. Circuit fight appearance fees are paid by a Killer's sponsors, too. Between the corporate attention and the ubiquitous camera drones or crews, many Killers come to feel stifled by the lifestyle they lead. It's one of the prices of fame and fortune.

SPONSORSHIP

There are many advantages to being sponsored. The first and most obvious one is money. Your sponsor will pay you every month to wear their logo, and to represent them in any way they see fit. Once the contracts are signed, you have "sold your soul to the corporate devil". The sponsor gains exclusive rights to use the Killer in any way the company sees fit for up to 30 hours a week (or 10 hours a week for partial sponsorship deals). The contract also guarantees the right of the sponsor to arrange fights, promotional events and public appearances without prior consultation or notice. Killers refusing to obey a sponsor are deemed recalcitrant psychopaths and given a warning; a subsequent complaint merits immediate execution as a threat to public safety.

The money paid to sponsored Killers has risen over the past year, representing how much company image is at stake – and in SLA Industries image is everything. The monetary value of sponsorship varies from company to company, with the larger companies and Departments offering higher rates. Monthly payments are made on the first of the month, and appearance bonuses are paid into the Killer's account after each broadcast fight in which he participated. The bonus may be doubled if, in the Sponsor's opinion, the Killer did particularly well. The values

below are for sole sponsorship after the agency has taken its cut, and assumes that the Killer only wears that company's logos:

Example Company	Monthly Payment	Appearance Bonus
Set 1		
Al's Taxis, Coffin Cigarettes, Ill-Logic, Itztrong Beer, Weird Alien Surfware, Fifi Laybelle, Danline Security, Tabitha Zu, Spatula Empire, P. Bond's Happy Mags, Flying Jelly AttackConfectionery, The Spooky Tomato Pizza Company, Beel Beer.	150c	25c
Set 2		
Arducci, Sigerson, Heynau, Track Optics, CAF, Pour le Grand Homme, Manta Security, UV, Servitude, Media Blah Blah, Bad Exposure, Massacre, Glow Good, Rush, Boopa, The Personal Interest Company, The E Times, HMES.	300c	50c
Set 3		
Third Eye News, SIC, Killzone, Slaughterhouse Six, The Schedule, Gorezone, Alien Sex Channel.	500c	100c
Set 4		
FEN, Berenyi Light Arms, Power Projects, GASH, Mac.	750c	150c
Set 5		
Karma, Dark Lament, Cloak Division, Department of Extermination, Department of Investigation.	1000c	200c

OTHER ADVANTAGES

Material goods and other benefits are also available from sponsors. These depend on the sponsoring company; the bigger the name, the better the deal. At the same time of course, would-be walking signposts should remember that the higher the set a sponsor belongs to, the more dangerous, sordid, demeaning or unpleasant the assigned duties are going to be.

SET 1 (KILLERS AT REP 1 - 3)

The companies in Set 1 are the smallest, least important sponsors. They provide, like most other companies, free supplies of the product they deal with. For example, Coffin Cigarettes will provide an unlimited supply of cigarettes, whereas Al's Taxis give a 60% discount on all fares. Free subscriptions and promotional items (clothing, accessories etc.) are provided where appropriate.

SET 2 (KILLERS AT REP 4 - 5)

The Set 2 companies work along similar lines to Set 1. These supply merchandise, promotional material and items to the Killer they have sponsored. The material tends to be a little better however, and the samples are provided in greater quantity.

SET 3 (KILLERS AT REP 6 - 7)

Media companies dominate Set 3. They will provide the Killer with as much air-time as they can spare, but only when the Killer

will make the company look good. They also have a habit of arranging 'set-up shoots'. The Killer is told that they must show up at a certain place and 'look good'. These can be anything from GoreZone attendance to huge Carrien hunts. These companies are known to put Killers' lives on the line for a few seconds of good footage.

SET 4 (KILLERS AT REP 8 - 9)

These are the arms and armour manufacturers of Mort. Set 4 companies will make sure that their 'Agent in the field' is provided with examples of what the company produces. Sometimes, the Killer may even become a tester for prototype equipment. These companies become more generous with their 'incentives' when Killers show that they are worthy of them. The more good coverage that an Killer gets a company, the higher the benefits. For example, Power Projects might give a suit of Heavy Exo Armour to an Killer to start with, and then 'build up' to eventually giving them some Dogeybone. The better the Killer makes the company look, the better the benefits will get.

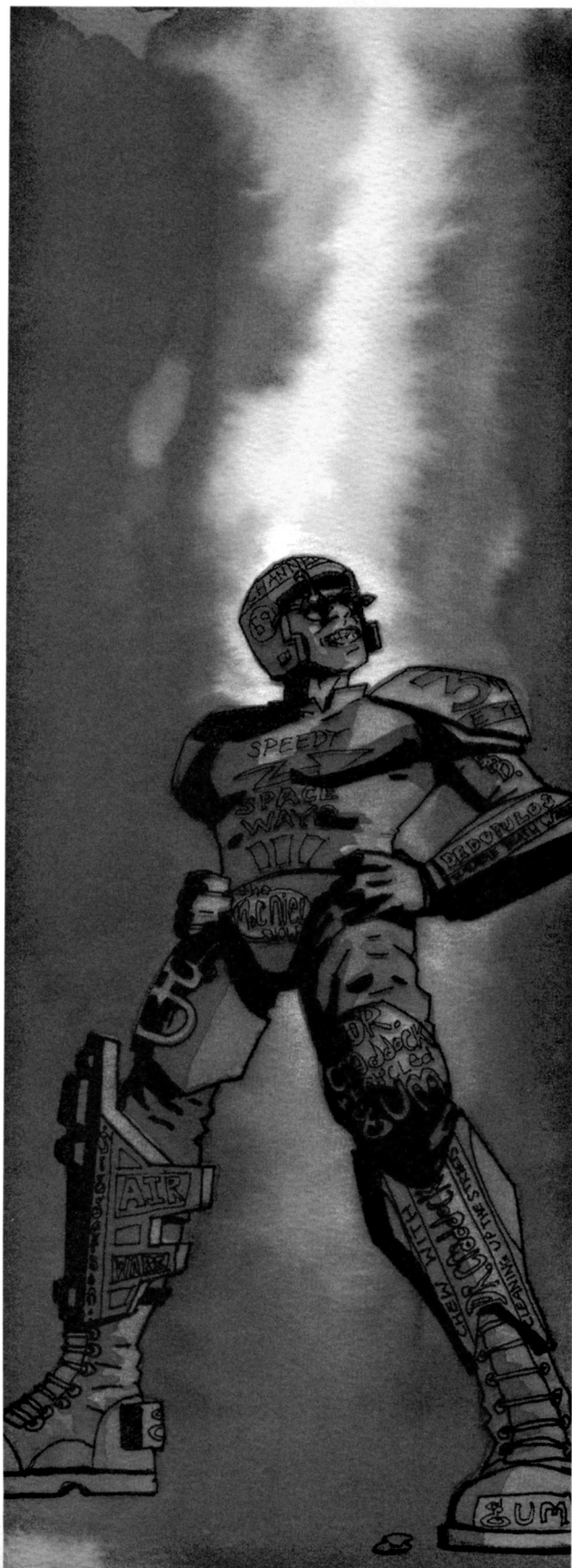
SET 5 (KILLERS AT REP 10)

Companies from Set 5 are the largest sponsors available. These are the larger departments of SLA Industries itself. Karma offers cheap LAD and enhancement, and other benefits to be negotiable; Dark Lament commonly passes over a full set of basic Ebb equipment, with Flux Gems given out as rewards for good behaviour. Other departments, such as Cloak, have less tangible benefits. In all cases, Set 5 companies will be well-disposed to Killers that they sponsor.

THE LOGO

Of course, all this means the killer must advertise their sponsor. Every square inch of a popular killer is valuable advertising space, and the sponsors pay to get their image on prime time television. Logos are normally placed on the shoulders, the torso (front or back), the head, the groin, both arms or both legs. A killer may be offered either whole body or partial sponsorship – new Killers are traditionally granted just Front Torso sponsorship from one Set 1 company. Everything else has to be earned by being impressive.

A whole body sponsorship means a killer exclusively has one company's logos on every location (or a design where their entire body is one big logo) this is worth the full value of a sponsorship deal. A killer fully sponsored by a single company is now out of the independent club, and will always be seen as the sell-out, corporate, lap-dog whore that they are. They have sold their soul, and as such their words are now tainted as their values are coloured by the dirty money they have accepted. But everyone has to make a living right? And the public doesn't care because they love you. And you only have to worry about one contract you have signed...



A partial sponsorship means a company only pays for a single location. Depending on the body part, this is worth a percentage of the full sponsorship deal.

Shoulders 15%
Torso front 25%
Torso back 20%
Head 25%
Groin 20%
Arms 15%
Legs 15%

This type of sponsorship is more popular with Killers that want to be seen as independent. They still want the cash, but don't want to be seen as a specific company's poster-boy. It is possible to generate more cash with multiple sponsorships, but every logo you slap on creates it's own set of problems, and lumbers you with a new set of duties – a fully sponsored independent Killer may have to do 70 hours of sponsorship duties a week, as opposed to just 30 hours for a sole-sponsored Killer. Sponsors also have clauses in their contracts about allowing sponsorships with rival companies. A conflict of interest between sponsors could result in legal action – don't try advertising a health club when you are sponsored by Coffin Cigarettes.

Savash has partial sponsorship deals with Alien Sex Channel (s3), Third Eye (s3) and The Hive Comic Mart (s1). His right shoulder bears a Third Eye logo worth 75c/ month (15% of 500c), his arms have Hive logos worth 23c/ month (15% of 150c) and his Alien Sex Channel sponsored groin is worth 100c/ month (20% of 500c).

Logos themselves are designed to attach a specific thought or mood to a name and place it in the mind of the viewer. They are designed to be seen, and are designed to be unique. Bright colours on dark are preferable in Mort's gloom. Red is rarely used as it changes greatly under artificial light and is pointless if there is blood flying about. Remember, If a five year old child can pick out a logo of a fast-food restaurant on a rainy crowded street, a sniper can pick out the Karma rising sun on your chest in a crowd...

VIDEODRONES

"There was this girl in down town. Good looking bird. Anyway, I mentioned my interest and, as they do, a few days later she turned up. Dead nervous at first; but a bit of wine, nice meal, few drugs later and she was warming up nicely. Then this fucking drone appeared, and she freaked. I suppose she'd never seen one before. The tit at control said he'd detected increased endorphin levels and thought I was going in for a kill. Lying bastard. Now I've got a 2000c fine for destruction of Circuit resources. Mind you, she was worth it."

Glenn "Carnage" Berry, Human Contract Killer, SCL 6C

In the 'Bad Old Days', Killers had to call in potential fights so camera crews could get on site. Good spontaneous footage was lost and surprise attacks were impossible. Third Eye invested billions in a cheap, rapid-response alternative. The Drone camera was born.

Drones are very quiet, highly-maneuvrable, 14cm diameter hovering devices. Multiple cameras provide excellent vision. The drones are remotely piloted, either from base stations or nearby camera vans. Unfortunately, the fragile nature of the equipment and careless treatment by both the Killers and the controllers mean 'breakages' are common, resulting in the Circuit buying the entire production line's output. Recently, fines have been introduced to discourage such 'accidents'.

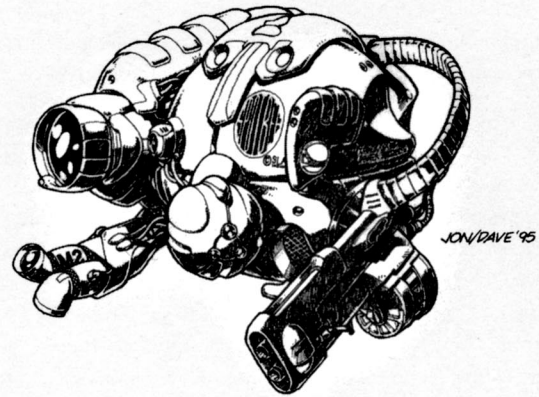
Initially, only a single drone is used to cover a new Killer. The quality of the footage from drones is amateur at best – a controller may divide his attention between 4 or 5 machines. There is also a time delay between the base station's commands and the drone's responses. Anyway, Third Eye does not waste its best camera men on base-station duty.

If good footage comes in, the station assigns more drones. If the Killer 'puts on a good show', the drone controllers spend more time watching feeds from these drones, and thus are quicker to respond. Eventually [at Rep 5] a camera crew is permanently assigned. Initially, this is just a single cameraman, but as a Killer's popularity increases [Rep 7], the team includes a second camera man and controller. High-ranking Killers [9+] warrant multiple teams, with drone support and a personal outside broadcast van capable of mixing and sending live feeds.

Contract Killers, of course, are in the public eye 24 hours a day. Supposedly coverage is not required in 'no kill' areas, but scream-sheets, fan club updates and gossip shows pay for anything, so their watchers are everywhere. Top names are usually surrounded by medias, financiers, technicians and groupies. Some top killers revel in this attention. For others it is too much.

Ultimately, the media, though apparently partisan, are there to get good saleable footage – sometimes against the Killer's personal interests. Killers with paranoid tendencies have viewed such sales as personal attacks and taken out their frustration on the crews. Though a certain leeway is available for a Killer's behaviour, the line has to be drawn somewhere. The loss, damage or death of media representatives or equipment results in a hefty fine. More significantly, a crew's understandable reluctance to work with unusually murderous Killers means drone footage may be the only option. The lack of good quality coverage results in the networks showing less interest; the loss of air time leads to public amnesia and withdrawal of sponsorships. Even if the death is accidental, or due to the action of rival companies, a bad reputation with the media can destroy a Killer's career.

Sponsors pay appearance fees for fights as described earlier. Killers do not earn further money for news and Circuit show



'SPOT-BEE'

appearances, but their contracts require them to accept constant filming. If footage is made into a dedicated documentary show or excerpted out as a film, the Killer will earn royalties on such secondary footage sales. Pretty young Killers of both sexes can earn a fortune from 'adult entertainment' sales of footage of their love lives, when they become famous. A good rule of thumb for secondary broadcast and other merchandising rights is to assume that a Killer starts earning his or her rank of Good Looks in c (minimum 1c) each month at Rep 3, with base sum quadrupling each time her Rep goes up.

WHITE VAN MAN

Just as the lower levels of the circuit are covered by the video drones and automated cameras, the highest profile Killers have so much film support that their camera crews require a little more than the basic robotics cover. This is provided by teams who follow the Killer in a van loaded with communications equipment. The most critical member of the team is the producer, skilled at mixing footage from multiple cameras into one live broadcast feed. He or she will also be supported by one or two engineers, who keep any eye on the technical operation.

The basic camera crew involves an anchor man in front of the camera giving commentary on the action, and one man behind the camera, making sure that the angle is perfect, the sound level, and the action uninterrupted. This allows the front man to make sure the audience's attention is where it should be, and if anything unexpected happens, they can quickly make reference to something else while their target makes good on the problem. A van is not necessary for this level of coverage.

More advanced coverage is provided by multiple camera teams, which allows the media squad to cover far much more than the one camera. They usually focus on the same area, covering different parts of the scene, or offering close-ups. The teams are very well trained, so much so that their synchronisation is almost flawless, and allows the viewer to switch on the popular "KC" (Killer Cam) function that allows them to keep up with their favourite killer at the press of a button. When not operating in a

synchronised function, the camera teams will cover the area in which their designated killer is operating at the time, allowing them to keep a constant view even when the killer is moving at speed or at long range. Van crews are critical to this type of operation.

The van crews are grudgingly acknowledged as part of the Circuit by most Killers, but that is not to say that the crews are appreciated for what they do. The Killers realise that without the crews, they would get no coverage, and without the coverage, they would have no career, but even so, they do not like the fact that the vans easily give away their position to anyone looking for them. Many Killers try to stay one step ahead of the crews, giving them brief glimpses of their location before vanishing again to the shadows. This can be frustrating for the crews, who are often paid by the number of shots that they get of the killer they are following. However, the audience is often impressed by the extra effort that goes into evading the Cameras, and consequently more grateful for the brief glimpses that they do get.

All vans are marked white with weatherproof paint, a clear indicator that they are a non-combatant target. However, accidents and "accidents" do happen, and it is not unknown for a team to be taken down in the course of their duties. There are always a number of backup teams on the site of a major event, and depending on the Rep of the Killer who's team has been hit, a replacement team may be on the scene within one to fifteen minutes. If the Killer herself took her own team out, many of the other teams will be understandably reluctant to provide that replacement.

Several of the top Killers have their own personal van teams that they regularly use. This allows them to make sure that they always get the shots they want and don't have to worry about the team being somewhere where it's not supposed to be. Those in the circuit who take this option will often arrange for communications between themselves and their crew, allowing them to set up shots they want that couldn't be made with a regular crew. Those crews on regular assignment to well-known Killers will often earn three to ten times more than their generic counterparts.

MEDIA EVENTS

"If you're not on TV, you're not real, you don't exist. If you can't get on TV, you're off the Circuit. I can get you on TV."

Jonathan Priest, Contract Circuit Agent, negotiating with potential client.

The 'top ten' Circuit event shows actually consist of eleven programmes. It is every agent's goal to eventually get their charge to appear on them all. Such veterans are shown a great deal of respect by one and all on the Circuit, irrespective of Rep.

Programme: GoreZone, hosted by SIC, sponsored by Third Eye.

Booking: Through established agents, open to non-CKs (Ops) via Financiers.

Style and Content: The oldest and many say best Contract Killer gig on the Circuit. The style is simple and timeless: cordon off an area of Downtown near one of the Cannibal Sectors, flip open Storm Drains, barrier gates and sewer outlets, disable any automatic wall security, stand well back and wait. The beasts and monsters from the festering Cannibal Sectors leap at the chance to break out, chasing down fresh meat or simply venting their pent-up pain, anguish and frustration on human targets. GoreZones are announced a week in advance. Shivers hate them, the public love them and Killers thrive on them. One of the only environments where Killers openly work together and are not forced to confront one another (though many do in grudge matches). GoreZone is the most challenging event to film. As there is a high loss rate of crew and equipment, bonuses are offered to camera Ops who can get the best close ups. GoreZone camera veterans are revered almost as much as veteran Killers.

Prize Monies: Each GoreZone utilises the 'Carrien Bounty' of 10c per kill, as well as 'viewer voted' bonuses for other beasts (10c – 50c). This is on top of a flat rate appearance fee of 100c.

Programme: Torture Trail, hosted by Third Eye and sponsored by them, syndicated.

Booking: Direct through Third Eye via the Circuit.

Style and Content: A weekly event involving 10-15 Contract Killers. Each killer is given the identity of one of the others contestants. Their task is to find that person and extract from them – by what ever means they feel the need to use – the identity of the next killer in the chain. There are 2 winners: One is the last standing killer, the other, voted by the viewers, is the most impressive victim. Entrance to the game is easy – whilst many Killers are happy to face death, surprisingly few are interested in being extensively tortured. As a result, Torture Trail cannot be not too particular. Financiers merely put their Killer's name on a waiting list and wait for it reach the top dozen. It is therefore an easy route to peak time coverage – though crying like a baby or quickly handing over the identity will not do a Killer's reputation any favours. Initially, pace is slow, with the killers exploring the arena, usually an area of Upper Down town/ Suburbia. By the end, it becomes 'edge of the seat' entertainment as the contestants vie for who catches who first. Broadcasts usually show highlights of earlier "catches" before cutting to live coverage as the last killers move in on each other. The torture sessions are shown as edited highlights to prevent the endurance of some killers messing with the timings of the schedule. Mega Torture Trail, involving up to 100 killers, occurs a few times a year, and helps to clean out any lengthy waiting lists. Footage of this event is shown as 'news-flash' updates, and fans of the program spend days tuned to the channel waiting for the next report.



Prize Monies: As the show can cross rank boundaries, each Killer Sheet varies in value, from 100c to 300c. Winning brings a 500c bonus.

Programme: Kill Zone, hosted and sponsored by SIC.

Booking: Direct with SIC via agents, experienced (decent Rep.) Contract Killers or Ops only.

Style and Content: Fast response, almost fly on the wall style, with camera crews ready to respond to the Killers bouts of slaughter or the Ops showdown with enemies of SLA Industries. Kill Zone Players are tracked by the SIC teams, calling in for visuals when things get juicy. Being in Kill Zone is high profile stuff – lack of activity and the all important violence will drop the Killer's media reputation quicker than a note from Cloak. The crews tagging the players often film other non-related combat action to goad those in the game to excess. Killers and Ops can sign on for the Kill Zone for 36 hours at a time: no kills means no extension, no chance of a re-run.

Prize Monies: Sponsors residuals: sponsorship contracts always carry bonus clauses for successful appearances on Kill Zone.

Programme: Slaughterhouse Six, hosted and sponsored by Third Eye, syndicated.

Booking: Through Third Eye selection process, open to all 'citizens' of Mort, not just Killers and Ops.

Style and Content: Frenzied free for all, centred on the 'Six Pack' Kill Sheet concept. Players are set Kill Sheets by the voting audience, who select from a range of targets that includes convicted gangers, Carriens, unlicensed Props, Killers or Serial Killers. There is a limited number of targets for the sixty Players to hit, and it's first come first served with prize money and bounty sheets. Players spend as much time taking each other out as they do going after their designated targets. An especially dangerous game as its open to anyone, Slaughterhouse Six runs once every six days and lasts for 48 hours, during which time all contestants and targets are live. Slaughterhouse Six tours Mort, running shows in one Sector at a time.

Prize Monies: Performance based on Kill Sheets. Sheets vary in value from 30c (ie ganger, Carrien), through 80c (high status Prop), and 100c (known Serial Killer) to 300c (Contract Killer).

Programme: Metal Murder, hosted by Channel 88, Sponsored by SIC, syndicated.

Booking: Direct with Channel 88 agents, or via Circuit agents.

Style and Content: Blades only in a tight, close up, almost claustrophobic shut-in confrontation between contestants. Usually shot in Upper Downtown, the Killers are followed closely by a single camera unit as they stalk the walkways. Each Metal Murder Meeting is hosted by the notorious 'Murderettes', who cheer on the Killers and have been known to spike one or two of the combats when they get boring. Metal Murder contestants are known to each other, and have a time limit to track each other

down. Once the clock is ticking, the reward money starts going down. Each kill (when confirmed) earns the money left on the clock. Up to twenty contestants take part in each Meeting. Those that do not make a kill are not invited back. Repeat contestants are common place, and well liked by the citizens of Mort. It's a blades only show – contestants are not allowed to carry a firearm in to the Meeting area.

Prize Monies: Metal Murder lasts for three hours. The Money Clock starts at 200c and ticks down 1c a minute. Bonuses are paid for style and the use of obscure bladed weapons (20c-50c).

Programme: Last Man Standing, hosted by SIC, sponsored by Third Eye, syndicated.

Booking: Qualify direct from Circuit fixtures, or invitation from Third Eye.

Style and Content: Played out in an 'open area arena', a designated area with cameras planted and covered by roaming crews, the show lasts for four to six hours. At the designated time (end of the show) there should be only one Contract Killer left standing at a designated spot in the arena. During the show, all Killers are free to wander the area tracking each other down for the kill. The show airs once a week and always draws massive crowds from the area it is hosted in, usually including Shivers, Monarchs, off duty Ops and non-participating Killers. The designated areas for Last Man Standing have been some well known Mort landmarks, such as the Intruder Statue at the Gauss Station in Sector 102. The show has a reputation for attracting the desperate and the insane, as there is no prize money other than for the winner, and if there is more than one CK still active at the end of the show, no one gets anything.

Prize Monies: 1000c, paid to Last Man Standing only.

Programme: Blood Money, hosted by Channel X, sponsored by SIC.

Booking: Direct with Channel X 'street agents'.

Style and Content: Interactive phone in show played within a sector of Mort, where the viewers, who must be registered citizens on Mort, pledge money as bounty on those taking part. A player who takes out another contestant gets the money that's been pledged. Channel X accepts pledges in unis, with a minimum pledge of 5u. The Channel then converts these into credits. What really spices the show up – and is fast making it a rival to Gorezone – is that the viewers who pledge money have their names and addresses flashed across the screen. This makes them liable for a visit from the target they've pledged their bounty to. If the target takes them out, the bounty becomes a reward. The show lasts two hours and is franchised in six Sectors. Now syndicated, it is destined to grow even bigger in the coming year. Each show features ten 'Players', drawn from the Circuit and the street, including Props, Gangers and just plain crazy citizens.

Prize Monies: As pledged by viewers, converted to credits by Channel X.

Programme: Alpha Wolf, hosted by Channel 88, sponsored by Third Eye.

Booking: Through Third Eye offices and agencies, direct from Circuit, Killers only.

Style and Content: Team game where contestants are thrown headlong into a combat situation with a follow up Objective. They have to form a team and complete the objective. Viewers vote for the 'Alpha Wolf' of the team at the end of the show. Once the team is assembled, they are first dropped into either a Cannibal Sector or a Lower Downtown 'hotspot', where they will need to make their first kills – usually from among the beasts, mutants, Soft Companies, or other outcasts that inhabit the area. The objective the team has been allocated will focus on the drop area, with the target usually turning out to be a group / clan / tribe / cult outnumbering the Killers by at least 5:1. Channel 88 obtain sanctions from SLA Industries and have hit some of the bigger Soft Companies and Cults with Alpha Wolf, making some mean enemies in the process. Once the show is underway, rivals from previous hits have been known to travel to the drop zone to seek revenge.

Prize Monies: Appearance fee of 100c, Alpha Wolf prize 500c.

Programme: Demolition, hosted by Third Eye, syndicated.

Booking: Direct from Circuit via Third Eye agents.

Style and Content: Each show takes place in a building due for demolition and restructuring. Contestants (twenty for each show) have to hunt each other down while avoiding the blast charges that rip the building open around them. There are always twenty charges within each demolition structure. These are detonated by game show contestants (eight of them) back at the Third Eye studios, who get to choose a number to detonate on winning a quiz round. A rough schematic is available to the studio contestants and audience, which shows the charges and tracks the Killers. Studio contestants must choose and detonate a charge within thirty seconds of the end of the round they win. If they take out a Killer, they get a bonus prize of 1000u. Demolition is usually played by Killers in the twilight of their careers, or by young and foolish (insane?) Killers trying to make a quick profit and make a name for themselves as a bit crazy. The show usually lasts two hours, with ten to twelve of the charges being set off during the studio quiz show. At the end of the show all remaining charges are detonated, regardless of where any Killer is within the 'arena'.

Prize Monies: Appearance award of 100c, bounty of 100c per kill.

Programme: Saviours & Sinners, hosted by SIC, sponsored by SIC, syndicated.

Booking: Direct with SIC agents, can be made from Circuit via 'qualifying' shows such as 'Bloodfest' and 'Cult Wars'.

Style and Content: Weekly show, featuring one contestant drawn from the Citizens of Mort and fifteen Killers. The contestant has to run a course set by the show, picking up an object from each contact point. The audience votes on the roles played by the Killers, designating each of them as either a Saviour (fights to help the contestant survive) or a Sinner (has to kill contestant and any opposing Killers). The feature of the show that pulls in the audience is the quarter-hourly voting, where the audience can change the status of any CK from Saviour to Sinner or vice versa, so Killers that may be allies one minute can be enemies the next. The rules of the state that there must be at least three Saviours and at least three Sinners that cannot be 'turned' designated at the start of the game, to give the contestant some sort of chance. The show last three hours, with a total of ten contact points for the contestant to cover.

Prize Monies: Contestant gets 100u for each object recovered from a contact point, with a 1000u bonus if all ten grabbed. Killers get an appearance fee of 100c and a 'scalp' fee of 200c per kill during the show.

Programme: The Counter, hosted by Channel X, sponsored by Channel X.

Booking: Through any Circuit agent or direct with Channel X Reps.

Style and Content: Citizens – not Ops – place themselves on a 'target list'. Each week, one of them is drawn from the list at random and awarded a 1000u prize. The lucky winner then gets to select two Killers from a list of 'players' to protect them. The show's audience in turn nominates five Killers from the list to hunt the citizen down and kill them. The show runs over three days, and the target is live on screen the whole time. During the three days of the show, viewers can pledge money to bring in other Killers on either side, to defend or kill the citizen. If a Killer on the play list reaches the minimum 1000u bid, he is brought into the game.

Prize Monies: 100c appearance fee for Killers who go live. There is also a 100c bonus for each kill, and a 500c bonus for the Sinner who kills the contestant.



KILLERS IN THE CIRCUIT

"The walk from the Killers' Enclosure to the arena itself is crappy. It's a long, boring tunnel that stinks of piss, and no matter how confident you are, you always feel nervous. We all do, no matter what we say to 3rd Eye. Then your lift platform starts rising up, and suddenly you're in the middle of it. The bass is thumping, the lights are doing their best to blind you, and the roar of the crowd smashes into you like a brick wall. There's a hundred thousand people out there screaming your name, looking at you, worshipping you. Everything else is driven out of your mind. It's like being a god. That's what it's all about. It makes the bullshit and the signing tours and the cloak-n-dagger crap all worth while. I sold my soul for that kick. It was worth every penny."

Sanction, Human Contract Killer (Rep 6)

THE FIGHT

Think about the start of any wrestling match, with the beautiful people, the glitzy costumes, the officials shouting and all that razzmatazz? That's what it's all about. Big egos, lots of noise, huge crowds cheering and jeering, the bright lights and laser shows, the tinsel and streamers, the big Security Guards in their uniforms. Arenas are the heart of the Contract Circuit. Jabbering anchormen and newcasters scabble to make the build-up to the fight as melodramatic as possible, with big introductions for the contestants, far-out claims to what they've each accomplished so far, emotional appeals for support, angry confrontations with 'dissenters' in the audience – fever-pitch excitement, even in Downtown. The fans in the arenas love every moment, screaming their adoration for the Killers. Millions of viewers will be glued to their vids, pulses racing as the action slowly heats up.

For the Killer, it's a mad whirl of deafening cheers, bottles being thrown, the sweaty press of people trying to pat you on the back or spit in your face, Security teams trying to get you through the crowds to the actual fight, hot lights in your eyes, whirling cameras and drones covering every angle. Everywhere they look there's smoke, grinning Civilians, other Killers and Agents seeing how they cope with it all. And that's before they reach the actual fighting area – the ring, pitch, start line, enclosure, building, room, platform or whatever.

When the Killer does finally reach the venue, he comes face to face with his opponents, the enemy or enemies who want to win as badly as he does, who want nothing more than to maim, cripple or slaughter him. It's time to show the audience what he's capable of – not as a fighter, but as a star-turn-entertainer. Taunting, strutting, acrobatics, wit, spit, arrogance, and smiles – they're all part of the action. It's the best chance the Killer will get to show his opponent that he has the superior image, and that he is going to win.

With all of the audience's attention on the Killers, the cheering quiets down a little. Voices are hushed in anticipation. Who will win? What will happen? How much blood will there be? Will their hero survive? Then – after a thousand years and the blink of an eye – the build-up is over, and the claxon sounds. The fight begins at last, at least five minutes after the Killers first emerged from their changing rooms.

For the cameras, it's not a matter of who did what to who – it's how they did it, where they hit, how they lost their balance, the blood flying from their mouth, the ear severed and falling to the ground and bouncing out of the arena. The beads of sweat forming on the rival Killer's brow as she realises she is going to lose. The insults and cheating that inevitably occur, the bad decisions from the referee (if there is one), moments of dizziness and disorientation, the tension, the anger, and of course the screams and cheers of the audience. The good Killer has to do it all, be an actor, be as dramatic as possible and make it fun.

The secret lies in appealing to the cameras, swapping one-liners with your enemy as you kill some nobody, saving the life of a friend in a tag game, being honourable or treacherous, anything that promotes your image and fits with the glitz and violence. Anything at all could happen during a contest, depending on its nature. Is there a chance for members of the audience to intervene? Could an Agent be trying to throw the fight in a particularly nasty way? How about a weapon malfunctioning, or a limb flying into the audience only to reappear in a Circuit Stores vid months later? Is the medical team up to the job, or are they all drunk in the bar? What do you do if the audience want you to kill your defeated opponent, but you want to save her life? Win or lose, what to tell the interviewers and audience afterwards? Who to challenge next? There's plenty of stuff that can happen – it's very rarely dull and straightforward.

“Approaching us now, through the crush of admirers, we have the Trauma Stormer, the Armoured Avenger, the Colossal Crusader, ladies and gentleman I give you the Bloody Fist! Two metres forty, weighing in at 103.6kg, winner of his last five contests – two dead and three down – unbeaten in the April Showers, a joy to watch...”

Standard Circuit intro, SD904.

UPTOWN AND DOWNTOWN ARENAS

As everyone knows, the best place to be is the Circuit-1 Arena in Uptown. It boasts state of the art Spot-bees and video walls, stunning pyrotechnics, more than 30 different fighting venues, the most famous Killers on display, viewing galleries, restaurants and games arcades, bars, shopping arcades, casinos and betting wings, and, best of all, the largest auditorium on Mort cutting up through the centre of the building, seating 250,000 people. Nearly ten levels of entertainment are available to the discerning fan. Rules and regulations are strictly adhered to and only true professionals allowed to participate. The Contract Circuit is at its



most official here in the Arena. Killers love to fight here because it is clean, reputable, well-paid and offers them the chance to grab serious media coverage. There are lots of other official arenas which operate across Mort, but 'the' Arena steals the limelight.

A lot of Killers are simply not good enough to reach Uptown, or do not have the heroic status necessary. To be able to qualify for the Circuit in Uptown, you must have a Charisma of at least 6, as well as some sort of edge that makes you specifically interesting. It helps to have a unique appearance and attitude, and to be appealing in some way. The Circuit-1 Arena generally only hosts fights between Killers of at least Rep 7, but there are some occasional exceptions – there may be room for heroic challenges against the best new Killers around, or mass melee to the death featuring a dozen or so beginners ... unusual, but good for ratings once in a while.

In Upper Downtown, official arenas can be found all across the city, and they'll feature anyone, more or less. The further down you go, the less the rules are followed, and by level 10, most fights take place in well-cleared streets. There is a 'main' Downtown arena called the Tynes Complex. It's a huge sprawling maze of interlinked venues, bars, gambling halls and other rooms that extends over levels 6, 7 and 8 (with more than 40 tortuous exits to more than 12 different levels across four sectors), but its influence is far less centralised than the Arena in Uptown. The profits in Downtown reflect the increased risks, with large sums changing hands if a fight is particularly viciously won.

The Tynes Complex is also responsible for founding the celebrated Circuit Amnesty, under which any renegade, subversive or criminal may register as a Killer (without any official SLA papers) and gain temporary immunity from SLA law. So long as the criminal does not commit any illegal act within Circuit territory, he or she may not be held accountable for any past actions while inside a Circuit arena building. At Reps 9 and 10, the Killer gets this immunity extended to cover all locations. Arrest orders, termination and search-and-seizure warrants, Grey BPNs, Hunter Sheets and even unofficial assault are absolutely forbidden. Frustrated Operatives are often amazed to discover that in the Tynes Complex, the Amnesty is policed by an ostentatious number of Dark Finders and Ebon Guards hired by the Complex management. It's one of the few places in the World of Progress where you'll see sights like Lisa Foden taunting Cerise, or Thresher pilots arm-wrestling with Operative challengers. The Complex has so many exits to so many different locations that it's impossible to stake out, and certain features in the network of exit systems make it just as difficult to follow a mark. The Complex management value the absolute neutrality of their reputation, and have installed a number of maze-like warrens that lead into complex exit junctions and are keyed to allow just one person through at a time.

MAKING IT ON THE CIRCUIT

If you want to be a Killer, you'll have to learn how to play the Circuit game. The first thing to do is sit down and work out what your aims are. If you want to make it all the way to the top, then you're going to need to put a lot of thought into your image, style and equipment – and a lot of creds into training. You will need to work out how you're going to make it big, and that depends upon the sort of Killer you want to be. Since the majority of contests involve some sort of weaponry, you need to be sure that you are better than average to start with or you'll swiftly be cut to ribbons. To accomplish this, work hard to improve your stamina, skill and experience. Don't be in a hurry. There's not much point taking advantage of the Tynes Amnesty and joining the Downtown circuit before reaching SCL9. The only people with slightest hope of making it out are the very best gangers, pit fighters and Ops. Make the most of your training, get some time out on the streets first, and give yourself the edge.

If you want to fight full-time, make sure you plan your day properly – you need to ensure that you put enough time into gym work and that you accept at least the regulation number of challengers. Take the time out to study your opponents – there is a 24 hour service available at all the arenas which gives out fight data (including who won and lost), future dates of contests, who has how many points in which tournament, and so on. With this information freely available, it is not much effort to monitor who is going to suit you the best.

If you want to make it, you need to challenge as many Killers as you can of slightly higher status than your own. Only a small fraction will accept, because there are always more challengers than those being challenged. This can prove frustrating, but the more fights you win, the more likely you are to make a name for yourself and gather some support. Vid appearances can help a lot here, so if you can survive a special challenge program like GoreZone or Torture Trail, go for it. When you get a following, you'll attract attention and with that will come bigger fees and more profit. Killers will accept your challenges simply because they know it means a bigger pot of money that they'll be able to take a percentage of, or because they think you deserve a good kicking.

When you begin to gather a crowd, you'll be able to go for bigger tournaments and stand a chance of being entered. That means more hype, maybe even some prime coverage and then you just have to keep going for it. If your career starts to flag, study your image – is it suitable for you, or is there a better way of presenting yourself?

Image is very important to Killers, because that's how they become unique. Many Killers follow the lead of the top few, and wear costumes, masks, strange hats and so on. That's up to you. Others prefer a bit of makeup and some flash armour, while many simply turn up stripped down and ready to fight, relying on their

natural charisma and a good-looking body to carry them all the way to the top. You must learn to entertain the crowd; often two Killers will deliberately pull their punches simply to last longer in front of the crowd and so increase the excitement and taunting. This is actually quite common and it's why being able to act can help enormously. Even Frothers "mid-rage" can miraculously pull their heads together enough to swap witty rejoinders at a crucial moment in the fight. You just have to be very, very good at judging when the truce is off and the real fighting resumes. Losing an arm is very hard to fake.

Some contests are less sociable. The Hunt is claustrophobic and haunting, and takes place mainly in silence. Fish in a Barrel does not favour those who want to be able to talk to the others, either. Most contests, however, are more than the spectacle of violence itself – they are the beauty of greater-than-life heroes sparring in bloody tournament. They are about audience worship of the (largely fictitious) people they always wanted to be.

THE GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

There are a bewildering variety of different contests for Killers to take part in. Many are run as one-off events or can only be found at a single venue, but of all of the varieties, there are six games that receive some 76% of Arena broadcast time. These are the major events, the prestigious ones, the games that really give the Arena fights of the Contract Circuit its identity. The best loved of them all is the Kinetic Pit.



THE KINETIC PIT

The unarmed combat areas of the Circuit are known as Kinetic Pits. These are 12m square fighting platforms raised some 6 feet off the ground, fenced off with brightly coloured high-tensile steel wire. They are generally used for one-on-one or tag-team events, although they also occasionally hold a grand melee. This is one of the standard images of a Contract Circuit fight. Two Killers battle until the victory conditions are met – the loser resigns, falls unconscious (as measured by failing to get up from the floor within six seconds) or a specific objective is reached (such as being the last in the ring), depending on the match. Apart from occasional special events, the Kinetic Pits are designated as No-Kill Areas. Tag events have two combatants inside the Pit at any one time, but each combatant has team members, and may touch one of them to have the two Killers swap places. Victory is decided in the same ways as one-on-one fights. Melees and Brawls occur when more than two Killers are inside the Pit simultaneously. Brawls are team-based, and melees are made up of single fighters. Up to twenty Killers can be involved. The winner is the last person left inside the Pit in a melee, or the last team to have members left inside during a brawl.

The Kinetic Pit started its life in Downtown with the first Circuit fights. It was the first event ever held in the Circuit. The Kinetic Pits nearly always play host to the largest and most prestigious events. The only area of the Circuit where all weapons and armour are banned at all times, the Kinetic Pits are where Contract Killers slug it out until one is no longer able to fight. Pits (also known as 'rings', despite their shape) are usually found in the main halls of each Circuit arena.

The most popular events now are the tag team contests. These have drawn some of the biggest crowds since the Circuit opened. This is a fairly surprising fact, because out of all of the games, the Kinetic Pit has the least bloodshed and the fewest fatalities. Killers are not allowed to use combat drugs in the majority of Kinetic Pit fights.

"That's right, Jimmy. As the viewers probably know, the Kinetic Pits host more fights than any of the other games—well over 100 fights a night here in the Arena. The Killers square off inside the ten metre ring to beat the living shit out of each other. My first big fight was in a Pit, in Downtown. Me and Knock-Knock were in a tag-team match with two wimpy Frothers called Rip & Tear, or some other shit. When we'd finished the cleaners had to wash them off the floor with sponges. Heh."

"Um... but aren't Kinetic Pits designated as No-Kill Areas? Where no fatalities are allowed and the object of the game is to beat your opponent into submission or unconsciousness?"

"Sorry, forgot about that one Jimmy. Yes, it is a No-Kill game, but accidents still happen. Know what I mean, Jimmy?"

Jimmy Lynn, Circuit Channel presenter talking to Gatter John, Human Contract Killer Rep 7, on "The Games People Play Special"

THE HADES HOLE

The most violent event in the Circuit is the Hades Hole. It gets almost as much vid coverage as the Kinetic Pit, and is similar in physical layout, basic principles and variations. The main difference is that the rules do not prohibit weapons, drugs or armour. The Hades Hole is a quick route to fame or to LAD. Ballistic weapons and the heavier armour types (PV 10+) are banned, but anything else goes.

Most of the fights are administered through a handicap system whereby all are equal, and it is only the skill of the individual Killer that wins the contest. On the other hand, the most popular fights are the regularly occurring grudge matches. Most of these are pre-arranged by Bookies, Sponsors or Agents, and can pull in big money.

Most genuine grudge matches take place in Downtown. These bitter fights are always to the death, generally fought outside of official arenas (although still fetching sizeable audiences), and cause a great deal of collateral damage as the Killers in question wreck their way through houses and streets.

THE PENDULUM

The Pendulum is an exhausting game. Two Killers are strapped by one arm to a horizontal frame suspended above a ring. The frame – along with the Killers – is then lifted 20m above the arena, and they are left to hang 10m apart while a 15x20m roofless cage is lowered around them. The cage has a number of hand to hand weapons attached to its sides.

The Killer's strap is extended down from the frame to let them hang 10m below the frame, and it then begins to swing. Once a sufficient speed has been reached, the Killers are able to grab for weapons on the cage walls or to swing at each other. The weapons available include just about any that can be purchased by Operatives. The only exception is the ITB Jolt Glove, which is banned from all Pendulum contests. Games of Pendulum don't always result in death, but often do result in the loss of an arm, a popular target for attack. Contestants with more than two arms are only allowed to fight Killers with similar advantages. Vevaphons are likewise restricted to fighting each other in Pendulum.

THE GAUNTLET

An extremely stressful game physically, the Gauntlet is also one of the very few true audience participation events. The Gauntlet is a track that runs 100m in length. The first 50m after the starting line are clear track; the last 50m stretch is surrounded by a crowd of randomly selected audience volunteers.

The object of the game is for the Killer to make it to the finish line without getting kicked and punched to death by the crowd that lines the track. Speed trials and team events are also quite common in this game. The Gauntlet is not totally one-sided, however; although it is frowned on, some Killers give as good as they get. Surprisingly, this never seems to put the eager volunteers off.

FISH IN A BARREL

This is one of the newer events, and is pulling larger and larger audiences as it becomes something of an institution. The event takes place in a blast proof room. The Killers, normally numbering around 20, stand against the walls of the room. When the door closes, the room is plunged into complete darkness, filmed using special imaging equipment.

A pile of weapons sits in the middle of the room. These are mostly unpowered blades, but a few other weapons are usually hidden at the bottom of the pile. Generally, these 'specials' are powered blades, but to add a little spice, there are sometimes two or three 10mm pistols loaded with a full clip of standard ammo and sealed in plastic bags.

The bags may seem strange until you realise that Fish in a Barrel is fought knee-deep in water. When everyone is in the room and has taken up their position against the wall, the door closes, all lights are turned out and a buzzer sounds. On this signal, everyone dives for the pile of weapons on the floor. From here on in, the rules are simple – last one standing is the winner.

The drawback to this contest is the racial limitations placed on it. The only biogenetics allowed to take part in this event are 313s, although the circuit does hold once-weekly "Stormer only" games. One of the main side-effects of any game of Fish in a Barrel is deafness. The room is enclosed, and when the first 10mm pistol is fired, all the Killers are rendered deaf for a good five minutes, and rather hard of hearing for a few hours afterwards. If they survive, that is.

THE HUNT

The Hunt is extremely unnerving, no matter how experienced the Killers are. This event is both feared and respected as a game of chance, skill and fire power. The Hunt attracts some of the best snipers and combat experts that SLA or any of the Soft Companies have to offer. It takes place in specially designed areas that copy large chunks of Downtown, Jungle, the Cannibal Sectors and other bewildering places, fused together into one big combat maze. The audiences love to see the finest Contract Killers as they stalk each other through the sanitised model, which is peppered with remote cameras and pick-up microphones. Every twist and turn of events is picked up for the viewing audiences.

The Hunt is a favourite game of snipers and all out combat freaks like Top Notch. Some of the more skilled Hunt contestants use their own unique abilities to play assassin, stalking their victims.

The Bushmaster is one such Killer who, through use of the extensive artificial jungle areas, has made his mark on the Circuit as a deadly adversary.

The Hunt matches are generally run as multi-player events that last a variable amount of time – sometimes days, sometimes minutes – depending on the skill and numbers of the Killers. Contests include team elimination and fox and hounds (where one skilled Killer flees from a large pack of lesser opponents such as Domino Dogs or newcomer Killers) and many assorted variations. The most popular are where many entrants are put in at random starting positions in the model, and have to fight until just one is left. Maximum weapons levels are decided for each event, and very few contestants carry anything significantly inferior to the maximum. These games are fought almost continuously, and are taped to be played on one of the Circuit TV channels. The live audience can watch the action as it happens on the massive vid-screens that are placed in the special galleries and around the Arena.

The Hunt started in the Arena, but the game is so successful that special venues have been constructed all over the rest of Mort. Some venues are particularly popular; in Downtown, a large area of levels 16, 17 and 18 has been sealed off for contests. The seals are imperfect however, and the occasional Carrien or Cannibal adds to the fun. In New Paris, The Hunt is held in Ferrouche Park, and the park is closed off for the duration of the game.

It is the Circuit Hunters who actually make the most money from the Hunt. They provide the more exotic participants. They are responsible for catching almost all of the alien animals that Killers are pitched against. These creatures come from all corners of the World of Progress, from the heart of the Cannibal Sectors to the forests of Kn'nth and beyond; even, it is rumoured, from White Earth.

MAKING CHALLENGES

Being a Contract Killer means fighting other Killers. There's no way around that fact. In order to stay on the circuit, you'll have to make challenges. It often proves difficult to get a match set up with your preferred opponent. A beginning Killer may well accept all challenges that come along, but that sort of eager attitude doesn't last long – novices quickly wise up or get carried out in chunks. However, at the lower levels there are plenty of opportunities to challenge, as there are lots of minor Killers, and some will be eager for blood money. An average challenge takes about a day to set up, but there's always the option of just turning up at the Tynes Complex and seeing what action is available that afternoon. There is usually a chance of finding a group contest in need of some extra contenders.

Actually getting into one of the recognised events is a lot more difficult. Big events such as Fish in a Barrel or The Hunt are always oversubscribed, and it is usually reputation that will get a Killer placed. Lower-level events are held on a semi-regular basis.

The competitions held in any given arena will vary from location to location. The majority of Killers do most of their Circuit fighting in a small number of preferred locations that they know. The stars nearly all focus on the Arena, the Tynes Complex or one of the major off-world sites. Inexperienced Killers wandering around the Downtown arenas will be greeted with a fair amount of suspicion – you always get a better reception when you are recognised, or when your agent has made some specific arrangements for you in advance.

System:

To have a challenge accepted: Attempt a Rep Roll ($2d10 + \text{Rep}$), adding +1 for each media special challenge program appearance in the last month, and +3 if your agent is arranging a specific match-up that isn't scheduled for at least a week. The difficulty (the target for having your challenge accepted) is $10 + 2x$ the opponent's Rep, +7 more if the fight is a grudge match to the death.

ONE-ON-ONE CONTESTS

The games and fighting environments that count as personal challenges are all based around a one-on-one format. These are the games that you will need to take part in on a monthly basis to maintain your standing on the ladder.

The Kinetic Pit - fenced off with high tensile steel rope. Plenty of scope for the true entertainer, and much favoured by the higher-ranking Killers, who sometimes get together for tag matches with their famous friends. For the lesser Killers, it tends to be about who can punch the hardest or wrestle the dirtiest, but even these contests can be a chance to dazzle the audience. This is the standard challenge match, fought to submission or unconsciousness.

The Hades Hole - weaponry and armoured suits in the Kinetic Pit layout. Very violent and deadly, you fight until one of you has to stop (or chooses to do so). Many opportunities exist here for banter and so it is popular with some of the more vicious famous Killers, like Chuerrin and Video Nasty. A handicap system means that everyone has a chance, with the better Killer having a smaller blade, worse armour, or so on. Grudge matches are very good for business, even if you have to fake the grudge. Challenge difficulty +2.

The Pendulum - Stamina and guts. Popular with connoisseurs of the Circuit, who know skill and heroism when they see it. Great reason for taking part in this is that the contests usually last quite a while and draw large crowds. Plenty of time to goad your opponent and show them how charismatic you are. Quite dangerous though, so try not to have your arms and legs chopped off. Challenge difficulty +3.

"Now, Bloody Valentine, I will avenge the death of my parents. For three years I have tracked you down and at last I have you.

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The only blood spilt here today will be yours. No mercy, no quarter, no way out."

G'nth (Shaktar) shortly before his death in a Downtown grudge match, seen by millions.

BIG EVENTS

These are the group games, the ones that every Killer dreams of coming through gloriously. These aren't challenge fights – instead, you put your name down and hope to get in.

Fish in a Barrel - blink and you'll miss it. Twenty or so go in and one comes out. Others may crawl out at a later point if they can hold their breath, but this is a highly lethal contest. If you have a death wish and need fame very badly, go for it. Cheating may help, but you are always strip-searched before contests so it could be tough. Counts as challenge on a Rep 5 killer for admission.

The Gauntlet - a chance to hurt the audience. Only fast or unstoppable Killers need apply, as it is quite surprising what a couple of dozen patrons can do to a complacent Killer. The team games are very popular (good for fellow Ops) and timed races between the best of the Killers draw large crowds too. Not much talking or room for witty one-liners in this contest, but it is extremely exciting. Counts as challenge on a Rep 6 killer for admission.

The Hunt - a fantastic idea, nearly always broadcast live whenever and wherever it takes place. Not always fatal, but usually is. About

ten or so go in and one comes out. Very tense and deadly, but also very good news if you're the one who walks out, as you become an instant star. The Bushmaster likes this competition, but if you know he's going to be taking part, it is suggested that you withdraw, or phone in sick or whatever. Counts as challenge on a Rep 8 killer for admission.

CIRCUIT LAW

"Rules? They have rules?"

Zero, Brain Waster, SCL 8.1a

Unlike most sports, the Rules governing the Contract Circuit were not specifically designed to provide a safer or fairer environment for the Killers, or to protect the lives of the audience. They are simply an attempt to make sure that fights last as long as possible and are as impressive as possible, so as to give the viewers the maximum entertainment. In Downtown, where the rules originated, this spirit is still honoured, and rules violation is normally acceptable as long as the Killer provided a good show. Failure to entertain will bring a stern response. In the Uptown Arena, the letter of the law is far more important, and several referees actually believe that the rules are designed to prevent unnecessary harm. Despite these differences, one set of laws is sacrosanct at every Circuit venue across the World of Progress – the Killers' Rights. Any violation of these will be punished heavily, regardless of location.



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KILLERS' RIGHTS

The Contract Killer has the right to use and wear any and all logos and symbols of any company or product that they have an official contract with. All contracts of this nature must be registered with the Contract Circuit board of authority.

The Contract Killer has the right to take the life of another Killer if the contest that they have entered into is to the death. If the Killer takes another's life whilst in a game but not engaged in a lethal combat, they may be subject to a disciplinary hearing. The most severe penalty that the disciplinary board can assign is summary execution.

Death of a Killer on Circuit territory but outside of sanctioned events is treated very harshly. Any person who terminates an officially sanctioned Contract Killer on Circuit territory – and who is not participating in a formal match against the Killer – will be summarily executed.

NO-KILL AREAS

These are combat areas of the Circuit that have strict rules on the level of damage that a Killer may inflict on their opponent. No-Kill simply means that any amount of physical damage up to coma and near death is allowed, but any action that results directly in physical or brain death is punishable by a ban from the Circuit.

THE HANDICAP SYSTEM

The Contract Circuit has a vetting system for Operatives who want to enter the Circuit, to make sure that a Chagrin on Ultra Violence is not put in a ring against a human armed only with a knife. This is simply a way of keeping most of the fights on a relatively fair basis. The system almost works, but as with most of the rules and regulations on the Circuit, there are numerous loopholes that Killers can find and use to their advantage.

The system works as follows: A Killer is assessed for physical strength and speed, and then for implants and any drug dependencies such as UV or other combat drugs. They are then matched against opponents of a similar disposition and physical standing.

This does have inherent problems. In the lower fighting classes of new, untalented Killers the handicap system works well. There are plenty of opponents to choose from. At the higher levels it becomes more difficult, as the number of matched opponents drops considerably. This is where the problems start, with Killers given drugs, armour, extra weapons and so on to try and balance the fight. This rarely works, and causes untold numbers of game disputes. Unsanctioned use of weaponry, armour, drugs or Ebb abilities is seen as a declaration of forfeiture, and is also a disciplinary offence. As many matches are fought against matched opponents chosen at random by the powerful fight computers, Killers may not know the identity of their opponent until five

minutes before the bout. This can lead to some nasty shocks from time to time.

In game terms, characters of Rep 1 to Rep 5 will fight against similar characters. The STR, DEX and best fighting skill of the combatants will be within 2 points of each other, weapons (if used) will have DMG and PEN within one point of each other, and drugs will either be used by both participants or by none. Ebb users will only be set against other Ebb users.

At Reps 6 to 8, compare the combatants, and the GM will give extras to whichever character seems weaker. If it isn't totally balanced, that's life. At Rep 9 and above, most of the combat will be against known characters, and players should be able to decide for themselves who to challenge and accept challenges from.

A weaker combatant (one with lower Rep) will always be allowed to claim use of any advantage that the stronger uses, such as combat drugs, missile weaponry, armour and so on. These details must be agreed between agents before the fight.

Please also note that as an exception to the above, when a Killer specifically challenges a stronger opponent as opposed to just entering the same competition, the challenger automatically forfeits all claim to any handicap benefits.

BANS AND SUSPENSIONS

These only occur when a Killer has seriously violated the game rules for the event that they are taking part in, such as killing an opponent in a No-Kill game. A suspension is the lesser punishment. It stops the Killer from re-entering the type of game in which the 'accident' happened for a set period. A ban on the other hand means that the Killer is not allowed to enter any events in the Circuit for a certain time. This can make life hard for the Killers, as they will also lose any sponsorship deals when they receive such a punishment. Any offence is initially referred to the Referee for adjudication. The Referee then recommends a suspension or ban if appropriate, and the duration. This is then assessed by the disciplinary board. The Killer may be called in front of the board to present their perspective if the offence is serious or controversial. The board's decision is final. Bans and suspensions can last from 24 hours to six months. Longer suspensions, including life bans, have been known, but are not common.

INDIVIDUAL GAME RULES

Each event can be fought to a variety of endings. The standard rules above apply to all matches, and some of the different types of contest have specific victory conditions. The lethality of the events is also an issue, and games can be fought to one of the three results below:

1) First blood. The first contestant to score a hit or to draw first blood on their opponent is the winner. In the case of tag team or multi-player events, a process of elimination is used. The first

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person hit leaves the ring, then the second and so on, until the final two Killers fight to first blood.

2) Knock down. The winner is the last person left standing in the ring. When someone is knocked to the floor, they have a count of five to stand again. If they fail to do so, they are knocked out.

3) To the death. The last surviving Killer wins. Most Kinetic Pit matches are No-Kill fights, but to spice things up, some bouts are fought to the death. Such fights may take a long time to complete.

EBB ON THE CIRCUIT

The use of the Ebb in Contract Circuit matches has always been a bone of contention between the establishment (Referees and Circuit co-ordinators) and the Killers. The main problem is that unlike drugs and biogenetic implants, it is almost impossible to monitor. Officially, no Ebb powers may be used in any Circuit game which includes Ebbless competitors, on pain of forfeiture. The Circuit-1 Arena has Ebb-absorbing Glyph Pillars in all its Ebbless areas, very similar to those that protect The Pit, but other venues aren't so fortunate.

There have been many suggestions in the past as to how the Ebb could be cheaply controlled in the Circuit. One of these was code-named "The Grid". Dark Lament were approached by the Contract Circuit about the design of a piece of Ebb equipment that could somehow absorb the offensive abilities of Ebons and Brain Wasters. Dark Lament were willing to produce such an item for the right price, but the project was scrapped by Preceptor Teeth for obvious reasons. In the wrong hands, an anti-Ebb device could greatly harm the Ebon race.



Other solutions were looked for. Karma have even been approached about the problem, and negotiations remain highly confidential. In the mean time, the Circuit attempts to field Ebon Referees in games involving Ebb-endowed contestants. The Circuit even thought about banning Ebons and Brain Wasters from Circuit events altogether, but this was firmly vetoed by

Third Eye, who insisted that the Circuit continue to allow them to compete. Ebons and Brain Wasters look too good; they make excellent TV. Without them, the Circuit just wouldn't be the same.

THE CIRCUIT ACROSS THE WORLD OF PROGRESS

The Contract Circuit has been a vital Mort City institution for 300 years, and like most popular sports, it has spread to the far corners of the World of Progress. Some of the planets have adopted their own versions of the Circuit. The main aim of Mort's Contract Circuit was to improve gambling profits by making the contestants into stars. Other places were quick to follow suit.

On Mort, Meny and Orienta also have their own versions of the Contract Circuit. These events work as regional qualifiers, with the best from the two cities moving on to the Arena in Uptown. On the other planets, cultural differences affect the Circuit itself. New Paris holds what can only be classed as the Poseurs Circuit. The up and coming Contract Killers show off the latest in fashionable clothing and hardware as they delicately compete for the title of 'New Paris Champion'. Hades is a heavy industrial world populated by a warped race of Ebons and Brain Wasters. Contestants here take part in brutal mental contests to decide who is the best. Standard Contract Circuit events are also present.

After Mort, the greatest diversity of events is found on Polo. Strength does not always win the day. More often than not, events test the speed and agility of the Killers. Perhaps the most popular event is The Run, a hectic gymnastic race through a 3D maze of bars, ropes and swings. Some of the holds are, loose, electrified or poisoned, and the floor is a deadly bed of spikes. Dante is one of the most unlikely places in the World of Progress to find a major circuit. This Circuit was set up as a prime-time TV scam to increase ratings, which it did. The Dante Circuit is relatively small, but it is responsible for more fatalities than any other Circuit. Thresher, DarkNight and all manner of other Soft Companies try to prove their true superiority by defeating SLA's finest. Some contests are even used to settle disputes. Armour and weaponry are a very important part of the Dante Circuit, and most contests take place over wide areas of the planet's huge battlefields.

EXOTIC TERRITORIES

Some of the most interesting fights take place in specially adapted territories that have been set aside for the use of the Circuit. These run the entire range of locations from the deepest bowels of Downtown to abandoned worlds a long foldship journey away.

CYRUS III - DORMANT WAR WORLD

Cyrus III was a lavish resource world enjoying the prosperity of SLA's famous 3P contract for over four centuries until the greed of

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the ruling class ended it. In 804 SD, Darknight persuaded the world's leaders to reject Slayer's offer, and in a public announcement, all SLA Operatives were imprisoned or expelled as the planet switched allegiances to Darknight.

SLA responded the next day with a blockade and the insertion of heavily equipped forces, including a division of the 3rd Nitro Legion ("Orlock's Hammers"), into the capital city. The resulting conflict escalated and spread across the continent, turning the entire world into a new War World. The population and infrastructure were pulverized within three years, but the heavy fighting and space based assault continued until late in 885 SD when all Darknight forces were officially considered pacified. Now the world is little more than a bombed out cinder, populated by crippled squatters and packs of wild dogs. The smoking ruins of the capital city (also called Cyrus) stand as a testament to the penalty for turning against SLA.

Recently the Contract Circuit Planning Committee purchased portions of the capital and designated areas open for combat. There are no less than five venues within the ruins, including the senate building (with dome), the huge Gothic library (once considered second only to the one on New Paris), and a labyrinth within the catacombs and sewers beneath Cyrus. The Cyrus architecture rivals anything New Paris has to offer, and will provide a suitably cinematic backdrop for the bouts.

Competitors are cautioned to proceed with care through the city ruins due to three particular hazards. First of all, the years of heavy bombardment left the infrastructure unstable in many areas and it is suspected that heavy stress or weapon fire could trigger a collapse. Primarily, this warning covers bouts that are held within the capital structure, royal plaza, and surrounding parade grounds. All Contract Killers within these sections are encouraged to include these irregularities in their tactics.

There are also unconfirmed reports of unexploded munitions imbedded throughout all arena areas. These munitions are quite sizable (standard war world issue) and should be avoided or exploited as traps by inventive combatants. The Department of War has assured the Contract Circuit officials that no bioweapons were employed in the siege, so competitors should not concern themselves sealed suits or potential contamination.

A final hazard that must be considered is that of the current occupants of the area. Contract Killers should expect packs of wild dogs and small, well-organized groups of squatters that survive within the ruins, often equipped with soft company weaponry. All unauthorized life forms in the arena area may be terminated at the Contract Killer's discretion.



DWH 2001



CUSTOMS STATION L-6 ECHO 5

"The silence here is so absolute that your thoughts echo in your head. The last few guys that manned this post went crazy and were carted off or had accidents. Me? No, I'm not crazy at all. I just joined the Circuit! Imagine what I'll do to the meat they send up here! I'll blow the pieces out an airlock!"

Chuck 'Chainsaw' Reiner, former Customs employee and serial killer turned Contract Killer.

SLA Industries takes perimeter security seriously and operates a number of Customs Waypoint stations situated around Mort. Equipped with long-range sensory gear and a modest host of weaponry, they are expected to both form the first line of defence against space borne invasions and to deter contraband traffic. Each Waypoint also serves as a refit and maintenance point, having the capability to service large ships, such as the D'mkt class Shaktar heavy cruiser and Ebon heavy foldships.

Echo 5 is composed of several independent sections separated by heavy airlocks and coordinated by a central computer and three-person crew. The spacious multi-tiered command and operations area is contained within a cylindrical central hub while two ring-like corridors contains lounges and quarters. Connected to one end of the central hub is a rectangle-like structure that houses the secure docking and engineering area. The primary docking machinery is positioned here in the form of heavy girders, scaffolds, and nets that enable damaged or seized craft to be pulled in for boarding and refit. With the exception of the

docking areas and certain access tunnels, all sections maintain consistent environmental conditions of 12 Degrees Celsius (54 F) and zero gravity. This has drawn harsh criticism from visitors, resulting in the installation of motorized handrails and issue of personal hand jets for movement. Since Echo 5 is far more spacious than required for its small crew, some speculation has arisen regarding its true purpose.

Competitors that come to Customs Station L-6 Echo 5 are in for an exciting challenge as they engage in combat in zero-g within and outside the station. While merely an inconvenience groundside, recoil and decompression must now be taken as serious threats. In zero gravity, weapon recoil, impact against a target, and even basic movement must be mastered unless the competitor wants to risk an uncontrolled spin. Decompression and the risk of serious injury due to a breach of the station's hull or of one's sealed armour will also require a degree of caution from competitors. Currently there is a ban on projectile weapons at Echo 5, unless the proper damage compensation waivers are authorized to cover repairs.

The Contract Circuit recognizes that Mort-based Contract Killers may be hesitant to try out such a challenging venue and is now offering an extensive training program to familiarize them with operation and survival in a weightless airless environment. Incentives in the form of equipment and substantial participation bonuses are slated for later in the year and are expected to increase interest significantly. Up on the station, a smallish network of gravity-enabled corridors have been prepared to give hesitant Killers a taste of the environment with slightly reduced hazards

THE BARROWS GAUNTLET

The Barrows was designed to be a luxury housing project set in the Vista Lake area of Downtown, but was drastically downgraded when the project's funding was slashed during construction by the ACP department. Hesitant to simply scrap the partially completed work, engineers decided to turn it into a line of low rent housing facilities. In typical fashion, the area was quickly stuffed to over capacity with Mort's downtrodden and the conditions were miserable. The only reminders of SLA's promised glory were the large stone gargoyles left abandoned in the central plaza.

Within several years, the Barrows were completely forgotten by SLA and the real problems began. When a DN bomb demolished a nearby SLA sewage processing plant, part of the Barrows collapsed into the sewer. The tenant's situation degraded when a cognate moved in and the Skin Trade set up a processing centre in the area, preying upon them. Pleas for help to SLA fell upon deaf ears, but a vigilante calling himself Armitage decided to take action. Calling himself the "Scourge of Evil", he detonated explosives that blew the seals to the nearby Vista Lake Reservoir and sewers. While the ensuing flood removed the Skin Trade from Armitage's neighbourhood, thousands of innocents were drowned in the process. Many more died in the weeks that followed as packs of Carrien and Scavs roamed unchecked through the area, slaughtering everyone they found. SLA's response came well after the damage was done, but not for any humanitarian reason.

The Barrows has recently been secured as competition site and offers an exciting slice of Downtown that is free of restrictions on collateral damage. The remains of the twelve tenements and two warehouses are partially collapsed into the sewer, providing plenty of rubble for cover and opportunities for running battles between floors. The street level remains slightly flooded, but is no deeper than shin level except in some collapsed areas.

Combatants will be faced with a variety of threats ranging unstable footing, concealed debris, and aggressive populations of Carrien and Scavs. Due to the sheer number of hazards, GoreZone scouts have officially dubbed the area the "Barrows Gauntlet".

MORLOS FORTRESS

When a research team from the Department of Archaeology based on the jungle world Morlos failed to report in, a search/rescue team was sent to investigate. When contact with this group and a subsequent team was lost, a Green BPN was issued to determine the team's status. Initially the squad reported that the excavation site was abandoned with no sign of the survey teams or any hostiles, but shortly after midnight, the squad's position was attacked and overrun by forces of unknown nature. Details of a transmission received from the squad leader during the battle are D-Noticed and not available for review. The



response from SLA was immediate, and four squads were dispatched simultaneously to clear the area. Currently the site is secure, but hostile life forms are believed to be resident in the area. All details are covered under D-Notice. In a surprising move, the Contract Circuit Planning Committee has been granted permission from Head Office to use the ruins and surrounding areas for competitions.

Morlos is a lush world offering one of the widest ranges of plant life known in the World of Progress. A dense canopy of trees, ranging from 10 to 45 meters above the ground covers the majority of the planet while clearer areas along the mountain chains are covered in thick creeper moss and colourful vegetation ranging from 1 to 3 meters in height. The rich vegetation has proven stunning to visitors, but the most shocking feature is the smell. Most Mort dwellers have never experienced air of this quality and report problems breathing. The high humidity and warm temperatures (average is 29 C, 85 F) often aggravate the issue and makes visitors uncomfortable and lethargic.

The Morlos fortress is a structure of undetermined age built of carved stone located near the mountain range at the edge of the Alpha-5 forest sector. Prior to halting of the excavations, several structures were catalogued, the most prominent of which is a twenty-five meter tall pyramid comprised of stepped levels. There is also an extensive canal network, three triangular underground chambers, and a massive catacomb system that spans a thirty-nine kilometre area and was used for burials.

Combatants are faced with unique challenges, the first of which is the heat and humidity of the jungle environment. Heavy

equipment will contribute to heat stroke and should be avoided. Even sealed armour equipped with cooling capabilities quickly fails due to the overload and persistent insects clogging the filters. The issue of weapon failure is not a concern in the short time of the bouts unless the weapon is of low quality or poorly maintained.

Since the competition arena covers the excavation site, the jungle ground plane, and the tree canopy, competitors are encouraged to diversify skills and weapon selections in order to exploit the area's tactical features. As always, competitors are advised to be alert for unauthorized personnel or life forms in the combat area and may terminate them at their discretion.

THEROS 4

Theros 4 was opened for exploration after the Shaktar Ion freighter Gn'th'rn suffered an unexplained catastrophe and drifted into the planet's gravity well. The Rescue/Recovery teams arrived too late to save the ship or crew but sparked interest with their reports of environmental conditions when they landed to survey the remains. In the following month, survey teams from the Department of Expeditions arrived and promptly classified it as an "I-9", a world unsuitable for purposes beyond research or waste disposal. The Department of War stepped in and took possession of the world for its own classified purposes.

To provide a staging area for the science teams, an orbiting monitoring station named "Overwatch" was built with the capability of predicting continental shifts and large-scale eruptions. With Overwatch's guidance survey teams used mobile



research stations capable of independent lift off to map the primary continent with minimal losses. These facilities, while technically still property of the Dept. of War, were released to the Contract Circuit when Theros 4 was opened as a combat venue.

Survey teams found that the planet's surface was far more hostile than anything they had previously encountered. The primary land surfaces are constantly wracked by violent tectonic shifts and volcanic eruptions. The atmosphere is near toxic incorporating a high sulphur and ash content and requiring the use of a breathing apparatus. The ambient temperature ranges from uncomfortable to dangerous with an air temperature between 37.11 and 63.4 degrees Centigrade (98.8 and 146.2 F) while the ground temperature can be much higher. Workers operating groundside are issued a "fire suit", a bulky heat retardant suit with independent cooling capability and air supply. Even with a fire suits most workers still sport a tan after several months on Theros. The worst threat remains the small-scale eruptions that cannot be predicted. These lava splashes have temperatures as high as 1100 Centigrade (2012 Fahrenheit) and are almost always fatal. As one surveyor put it, this is as close to Hell as you can get in the World of Progress.

Newcomers to Theros are awestruck by the world's haunting beauty the moment they exit the shuttles. The ground plane is formed of past lava flows and characterized by jagged outcrops and plateaus of serrated black glass that rend soft armour and radiate heat even through insulated armour. The most disturbing aspect isn't the distant fiery geysers or red tinted atmosphere, but the sound of the planet itself. Regulars dubbed this "the growl" and the name stuck with survivors.

Competitors are strongly encouraged to remain aware of the environment and use the lava spouts, spontaneous fissures, and razor edged surfaces as weapons whenever possible. Likewise, competitors are cautioned to protect their breathing gear since more than one promising fighter has succumbed to the atmosphere due to a damaged or failed respirator.

THE SWAMPS

"When I first hit the Swamps, I remembered how alien the place looked and smelled. Green mouldy water, islands of junk and more inbred rednecks than you could shake a stick at. A word of advice – never underestimate anything down here, especially those bastards. Of the twelve guys we had in my last bout, those inbred cannibal fucks got five of them and the pigs nailed two others. Of course, I bagged the other four. Wanna see their scalps?"

Skinner, Contract Killer.

The area known as the Swamps is a heavily inundated section of lower Downtown located near the bottom of the perimeter wall to CS 3. Several levels collapsed together across a couple of sector boundaries to leave a large, dingy opening. Rubble and other junk from the collapse, along with years of runoff from the nexus of



drainage tunnels, combined to form the Swamps – a tapestry of island-like masses of junk and debris that stretches for several miles. A complicated network of thin canals cut through the area and serve as the most efficient method of transportation.

The area is considered hostile to SLA representatives due to a combination of aggressive local wildlife and an unpleasant indigenous human population. The most common predator comes in the form of huge carnivorous pigs, many of which weigh 200 kg or more. These creatures roam the junk islands in packs, viciously attacking anything that moves. Local legends also mention waterborne predators such as the "Big Squid" and "Longtooth", a three-headed alligator-like creature, but these remain unsubstantiated myths.

The worst threat to visitors comes in the form of the four families of humans that have laid claim to this area. These groups refer to themselves as clans and each controls a specific territory called a Parish. The family names with territories are: Garrity ("Red Water"), Duchamp ("Deadwater"), Baer ("The Fryer"), and Komi ("Perdition"). Each group is over a hundred members strong and constantly runs well armed patrols on skiffs in their area. While the details of each group vary, all share the traits of extreme xenophobia, strong territoriality, minor paranoia, and an affinity for violence. Several competitors unfortunate enough to be taken prisoner have also learned that the clans are cannibalistic.

Since the area designated for the Circuit bouts overlaps each of the Parishes, competitors should expect to encounter boat patrols from at least one clan. As always, trespassers are valid targets and can be eliminated at the discretion of the Contract Killer. If the reaction from these squatters becomes overly disruptive to an ongoing competition, organizers reserve the right to halt any activity.

Contract Killers planning on competing in the Swamps should be thoroughly equipped with both melee and firearms in order to best address the local threats. Since transport within the area is achieved with flat bottom skiffs, it is recommended that any participant also be able to swim and forgo heavier armours to facilitate survival in the water. While sealed armour may allow a combatant to survive submersion, extraction of anyone falling into the canals is not guaranteed.

KILLERS ON THE RAMPAGE

"Sometimes, you get a taste of the fame, sometimes the fame
takes a taste of you..."

Mr. Pokey Hat, Contract Killer, 872SD-903SD

THE STREET CIRCUIT

The life of a Killer on the Arena Circuit is somewhat different to the lifestyle of those who operate from the darkness of the streets. The Street Circuit is anywhere you want it to be, anywhere so long as the location is outside of Central, and it's not the home of a Killer. The streets are a testing ground for those who believe that they have lost their edge, and the proving ground for those who know they have it and want to progress. The Street Circuit can rise up to swamp you at any time. To make allowance, there are several rules on the street that do not apply anywhere else.

The first rule is the Right Of Contest. Any Killer may challenge any other Killer whilst they are walking the streets. There are restrictions to this, in so far that you cannot merely snipe at your opposition from across the road as they buy groceries. Challenge must be formally made as a declaration of weapons and end result – "Blades to the death, asshole" – then the Circuit informed prior to the start of the fight, and the challenged Killer given time to prepare. Refusing a challenge is permitted, but do it too often and even the best excuses won't stop you getting a name as a cowardly poseur. The time allowed for preparation is at the discretion of the challenged Killer, to a maximum of thirty minutes. The challenger must not have set traps for the challenged Killer around the challenge area in advance. If both parties are ready for a fight though, the battle can start in the time taken for one Killer to snarl "Die, then", and the other to mutter "challenge match" into his mike, to warn his control. Regular Street Circuit fighters quickly develop a reputation of always being ready to snap into battle. Circuit Rep is less important than media profile on the street, and street matches do not count as Circuit ranking events.

Beyond this, anything goes. It is down to the fighters as to which one of them will triumph. So long as the combatants stick to declared weapons – Ebb must be declared too if it is going to be

used – then there are no restrictions, no referees, and no rounds. No one dares stay monogamous to one strategy, just in case people recognise the strategy and use it against them. This teaches an essential lesson – adapt and survive.

The second rule is the Price Of Death. Death costs money, and the Killers are fully responsible for the deaths that they cause. This may seem a little harsh, given that Killers fight for a living, but it stops wannabe Killers from applying for exemption and then going on a rampage, covered by the law. Collateral damage and casualties are expected, but fines are payable – a civilian costs 50c, an employee 500c, a Shiver 850c, an Operative 2500c/rung on the SCL ladder, and a Corporate 4000c/rung on the SCL ladder. The fine can be waived for unimportant individuals killed in a particularly accidental or spectacular manner, but killing important persons may end up being considered treasonous, so Killers are advised to err on the side of caution. SLA property is also covered by this rule, and unnecessary collateral damages will come straight out of the Killer's pocket as well.

Fine waivers are guaranteed in some instances. There are no restrictions on damages and deaths caused inside a competition area. Civilians and Operatives wandering through a GoreZone are there at their own risk and the price that they will pay for their stupidity is theirs to bear alone. In cases where a property damage exemption is possible, the Killers will be informed at the beginning of the competition that a certain amount of collateral damage will be tolerated. They are never be told the full extent of permissible damage however, because of a faint hope on the part of the Circuit organisers that this will limit damage caused.

Each Sector keeps a record of the types of contest that are most popular in that area, and professional street Killers will take this into consideration when making challenges. Many Killers will stay within certain specific sectors, knowing that they can easily secure the match of their choice within that area. Some sectors have rules that are only operational within that sector – such as the Winkworth Sector rule of no ranged weapons of any sort. These rules have given rise to themes in certain areas, ranging from simple things like signature moves contests – first Killer to hit his opponent with his special move (see combat section) wins – to the truly complex, such as ritual matches.

Given the dangerous nature of the Street Circuit, there are always designated safe zones on the street. These zones are re-assigned from day to day, although the same can be assigned repeatedly. In the more active sectors, the safe zones are changed once every six hours. While in a safe zone, the Killers may neither challenge nor be challenged. The penalty for breaking this rule is expulsion from the Circuit, either temporarily or permanently, depending on the whim of the adjudicators at the time. Few Killers are prepared to risk this penalty just to get even with someone, although it is not unknown for Killers to stake out safe zones and wait for them to expire. A Killer's home is always a safe zone for her. Sanctuary is important.



Killers who take part in the Street Circuit are tempered in blood and fear. Frequent participation can scar a Killer in more ways than one. To make a living on the Street Circuit takes dedication, perseverance and skill. You generally get less airtime, but when street Killers become famous, they inspire respect and fear that no Arena Killer ever could. The streets are hard and brutal, and everybody knows it. They are certainly no place for the weak or anyone lacking ability, even if you don't need to run around booking fights or relying on your Rep to take part. There are more subversives, criminals, maniacs and monsters on the street than there are in the Arena – it's where ugly Killers thrive – but that doesn't make it easier. It is a challenge that few can rise to.

Can you?



COVERT GAMES

"I knew it was a trap as soon as I opened the access hatch. Painted on the underside was a sketch drawing of a Carrien. The same symbol had been sent to me in a letter just a few days before, along with the shattered head of a hockey stick, covered in dried blood. It hadn't taken much effort to realise that it was Snake Eyes who was pissed at me for some reason. Probably the way I'd sucker punched him in the last game and then kicked him when he was down. It didn't matter. If he was going to ambush me, he'd be the one ending up worse off."

Fox Glove, Frother, Contract Killer

The stereotypical view of Contract Killers is that they fight under certain conditions or in specific locations. These fights are often advertised beforehand, to allow for the highest possible viewing figures. Killers sometimes decide to take matters in to their own hands, however. Normally this is as simple as two rivals immediately fighting each other next time they are together. These fights will take place under the eye of the media, courtesy of the camera teams following the Killers around. However, not all fights take place under the eye of the video lens. Contract Killers sometimes prefer to attack their opponents covertly, either as a warning, punishment for a past act, or at the dictate of their sponsors. To prevent Killers just assassinating each other, a strict set of guidelines has been established that limit what can and can not be done in such circumstances.

When a Contract Killer plans to covertly attack another, he has to declare his intentions to his victim. Only the most dishonourable will attempt to kill their targets without giving a warning and often they will find their Rep decimated by the act. The declaration is a warning to the intended victim that sometime soon they are going to come under attack, although it often gives little information about the actual threat. Instead, the target knows that they have to be on the lookout for anything suspicious. Also included in the declaration is an indication of the level of threat. More often than not this kind of fight is to prove a point or defend a belief, and as such the target is only to be wounded or humiliated. However some covert games lead to disfigurement and death, even to the point of being non-recoverable by LAD or Ebb abilities. If this is the case the Contract Killer has to have made his intentions perfectly clear to his target beforehand, otherwise his reputation will drop and Cloak Division may want to discuss the assassination attempt.

The actual declaration differs from Killer to Killer. Clues such as bullets, written notes, drawings, flowers and other items may be sent, and should hint at both the level of threat and the identity of the Killer. Normally these are mutilated or disfigured to show the intent of the declaration. For example a rose with two of its petals separated from the main flower may indicate a fight to first blood, whereas a pocket watch missing a hand may indicate a fight to disfigurement. It is up to the victim to identify the

reasoning behind the clue as well as to determine who is planning the attack. Occasionally the Contract Killer is simply targeting his victim because he has orders to, but more often than not covert games are private grudges between Contract Killers, either because they work for rival sponsors, or because of events that have happened on other parts of the Circuit.

Once the declaration has been made, there are restrictions in how the Contract Killer can act. One of the primary rules is that no innocents can be harmed. This includes any family or friends of the target, unless they too are Contract Killers – and if this is the case, separate declarations should be made to them as well. Clues should also be left as a final warning prior to the ambush. These are invariably linked back to the original declaration, such as placing the same object on the safe side of an ambush point for example. In hindsight, these clues should give a clear warning of what is about to happen, although if a victim is not observant enough it is their own fault.

“I was right, it was Snake Eyes. He was standing down the end of a sewer, cockily beckoning me to come and get him. The section of sewer was well lit and I could see a camera crew just behind him. I powered my Claymore up and started running through the foot deep water towards him. I was slightly too late noticing the same Carrien picture at the side of the sewer, with one of its legs submerged into the water.”

Fox Glove, Frother, Contract Killer

The actual ambush is up to the individual. They are allowed to request additional help, so long as they make it clear in the original declaration. They are also allowed to prepare the ambush point in advance, using any equipment they want. It is generally accepted that projectile weapons should not be used, and explosive grenades are seen as going too far. Common tactics include stakes, trip-lines, falling debris and booby-trapped walkways. Additionally, leading victims into locations filled with other predators such as Carnivorous Pigs and Manches to soften them up before the actual fight is also popular. The only real limit is the ingenuity of the Contract Killer, as long as he has made his intentions clear previously.

The majority of the time the Contract Killer will only subject his victim to the level of threat established in the declaration. The media will sometimes intervene, however. A Killer's camera team may try to change the hostility level, especially if it means higher ratings. They may bribe, persuade or threaten so that they can alter the fight to their own requirements, even tipping off the victim if the Contract Killer refuses to co-operate. Covert games are always recorded and edited together after the event has gone down, partly because they would be boring and drawn out otherwise, and partly to stop the target getting all of the information he needs from the Circuit Channel. The game is usually announced as soon as the victim knows about it, and the target may be followed around if they have a high-enough profile,

but the attacker is always kept secret by her control crew until after the event.

The only way to survive a covert game is to be observant of everything and everyone around you. Most victims have an idea about who holds grudges against them, and may hire Operatives or Props to confirm these beliefs. Once they know someone is out to get them, they will often try and turn the tables on them, declaring their own terms and also planning how they can counter-ambush instead. When experienced Contract Killers are taking part, covert games can go on for some time as both parties plot and counter plot, drawing in other individuals to assist them.

“The drugged up little idiot came running right at me. By the time she noticed that I'd drawn another shadow on the wall, marking a tripwire concealed by the water, it was too late. I was moving as she started to fall, and got close enough to smack her hard in the face as she tried to stand up again. I knocked her into the bottom of the pipe, breaking her nose, and then pulled her head clear of the sewer water. I've got a still from that video on my wall. It's just her and me, my arm around her neck keeping her head out of the water for her whilst her sword strikes sparks off the side wall. They've done a good job rebuilding her nose.”

Snake Eyes, Carrien, Contract Killer

HUNTER SHEETS

The Killer's little green friend, a Hunter Sheet is a combination of execution warrant and wanted poster that SLA uses to post the details of people that it wants killed. Each Sheet contains details about the target, relevant notes, and the bounty payable when the Sheet is filled. Hunter sheets may be sponsored by any private individual, sub-company or Department, subject to Cloak Division approval. Sheets are only approved for SLA employees given clear evidence of treason or a similar capital offence, but unimportant civilian targets can be approved on reasonable suspicion – the logic being that if someone is prepared to go to the effort and expense of sponsoring a sheet, they must be pretty certain about it. Because they are open to both Killers and Ops – and because a Sheet remains open until filled, and therefore cannot be ‘reserved’ – Hunter Sheets are often fiercely contested. Open Sheets are logged in a number of different locations, including a SLA-net database run by Hunter Control, log books at Cloak Division, the Arena and the Hunter Control offices in Suburbia, dedicated magazines like “Huntmaster” and “Search and Destroy”, direct fax broadcasts and a number of Hunter Cafes across the city.

The Sheet itself is a green document about 5 x 8in, and contains personal information such as a photo, name, address, physical description, job and offence, as well as additional information such as areas of skill, interests, friends and family, habits and so on. You read the sheet, note the information (or copy the sheet), then track the target down and kill him or her. It's as simple – or as lethal – as that. Unlike BPNs, Hunter Sheets are not assigned



or applied for. Their status only changes when the target is killed. Hunter Sheets are typically issued for targets who are too petty or minor to warrant the paperwork of a Grey BPN, too hard to track down or reach to make a BPN profitable, or too dangerous to risk trained Operatives on. In addition, Hunter Sheets tend to be more public than Grey BPNs, so may be more suitable for high-profile targets.

Hunter Sheets are open to anybody with SCL 10 or better, and are available until Hunter Control are contacted with proof of a kill. This normally means that there are a number of people hunting the same person. Because of the competitive nature of the Contract Circuit, it's common practice to be very secretive about the Sheets you are attempting to fill, just in case someone fancies getting a head start.

"I went into a Hunter Cafe the other day. The decor was very trendy and everything, and it's dead handy if you don't have your own Oyster, but it was so quiet... I sat down with a coffee and a cigarette, and all I could hear was the tapping of keyboards and the scribbling of pens - It was like my final exam at Meny."

Deimos, I & I Operative, SCL 9a.2

The value of a Sheet varies according to the crime the target has committed, the expected difficulty of taking him down, and how much the Sheet's sponsor wants the target dead. Bottom rung sheets - "Please kill the gang member who poisoned my dog" for example - go for about 100c. At the higher end, a Thresher terrorist located on the other side of the World of Progress could fetch 100,000c+. Most Sheets fall in the low 1000s though, and get filled quickly by Killers or Ops in the area on a BPN. Occasionally the media might sponsor a Sheet with an inflated cash value to generate good TV, and some targets are so dangerous that their sheets are a joke - Halloween Jack's Hunter Sheet is a cool two million. No-one has collected. It's worth pointing out that Hunter sheets are a matter of SCL 11 public record, so most targets will know you are coming.

Once the target is dead, Hunter Control have to be contacted and the kill proven. The target's death must be verified either through a corpse turned over to the Shivers, or by clear camera footage and a DNA-verifiable body part. Killers with camera drones will have no problem, and neither will Op squads with a Media Operative or anyone with a finance chip. Any kill can be confirmed by an on-duty Shiver. Third Eye will also make the effort to confirm a kill if it makes good news. Digits, extremities or even whole limbs are not considered sole proof of a kill, though at least 50% of a head is. A heart, a pair of lungs and a spinal cord are other examples of proofs that have been excepted by Hunter Control in the past.

"This is Sammy McLacy of squad DeadBeat to Hunter Control. Sheet 904-03-03-4546 Target 'DeeKaye' has been filled."

"Do you have confirmation?"

"Target currently resides within a family of carnivorous pigs, following his explosive termination. No footage has been taken."

"Proof will be needed before Sheet is filled. Will you require any apple sauce?"

"Hardy-fucking-har Control..."

Disagreements and rivalries are common when filling Sheets. More often than not, there will be multiple Killers and Operatives hunting the same target, and a Hunter Sheet may even be opened on a civilian who is pertinent to the completion of a BPN. SLA Industries as a whole encourages co-operation and fair play between its Operatives and Killers, but because of the nature of the parties involved, most of these 'jurisdictional' hiccups end up being solved by violence. Besides, it makes good viewing. Operatives have less freedom than Contract Killers when it comes to killing other SLA staff, so they generally make reasonable attempts at identifying themselves and issuing warnings, just in case the terms 'self defence' or 'just cause' are needed.

Anybody with SCL can sponsor a Sheet by filling out a form and sending it to Cloak Division. Cloak check that the Sheet is appropriate, depending on the target's crime, SCL and reputation.

Sheets on undercover Internal Affairs agents are automatically lost in the system. Approval for targets without SCL is almost always given, providing there's at least a half believable trumped-up charge. After Cloak approval, the reward funds (plus the same again for admin charges) are removed from the poster's account, and held by Hunter Control. The Sheet is then placed in the database, and can be accessed immediately. The entire process can take anywhere from three hours to a week, depending on the attractiveness of the Sheet and the amount of information available on the target.

Obviously, Cloak keeps an eye on who sponsors Sheets on who, just in case someone develops the habit of serial killing by proxy. They will also ask their Dark Finders to pay a personal visit to anyone who seriously sponsors Hunter Sheets for certain targets, such as anyone in Cloak Division, the Heads of SLA departments, Mr Slayer and so on.

"I knew she was spotting for the Kiestas when she was working in the bar. So after her tantrum, I stumped up the cash and put out a 100c Sheet on her. I never saw her again. Serves her right, the frigid bitch."

Kerouac, Media Operative, SCL 9B.2

Making a living from Hunter Sheets is a world away from popping down the crib for a BPN. Unless you are a company's favourite pet Killer and can get some forewarning, you have to do a lot of legwork to fill some choice Sheets. You're up against god knows how many other Killers and Operatives chasing down the same target. He might already be dead in the time it takes you to get across town. You have little or no information, no back-up, no search and seizure warrants, no station analysis or BPN control watching out for you. Hunting down a target can take time and money, dragging you to hostile places and forcing you to deal with dangerous people. Finally, when you have found your target, you have to kill him – and he probably doesn't want to die.

This kind of lifestyle leads to depression, stress and other mental disorders, and can result in problems with drugs and alcohol. Ninety-nine percent of Killers are obviously at that point anyway, but Operatives used to a slightly more secure lifestyle may eventually go mad and end up as Killers anyway.

There are as many different techniques to filling Sheets as there are Operatives and Killers out there, but most dedicated bounty hunters keep track of a bundle of Sheets they like the look of, calling on a web of spotters and information dealers. When one or two leads pop up, they go killing.

Operatives tend to do things differently. While it's possible to kill some time in between BPNs by filling in simple Sheets here and there, most treat a Sheet like a White BPN until they have the target in their sights. Alternatively, some smart Operatives search the database for Sheets applicable to the area they are going to be stuck in on a BPN – after all, you never know who you'll bump into...

"It's like sex. The first few times are the biggest thrill in the world, then you stop for some reason and you miss it a hundred times worse than when you never did it. Then you start doing it regularly, and it becomes part of your everyday life... I mean, you look forward to it, and it's good, but it's not the same as when you first started. Then you find you are doing it less and less until one day it's really good because you did something different. Then for a few years you look for the different thing. Then you look at yourself one day and you're wearing a strange costume and a weird mask and chains and things..."

Glenn "Carnage" Berry, Human Contract Killer

RATES OF PAY

Most Killers are in it for the money, leaving those that enjoy bloodletting on the fringe. The Street Circuit pays well in both prizes for events and residual appearance fees from Sponsors. The rates of pay for appearances on the street vary from those in the arenas. There's less emphasis on a fixed reward, with amounts varying depending upon coverage obtained at the time, the size of the crowd, the quality of the opponents, etc. Accidentally bumping in to a notorious rival in a Mall while signing merchandise for the adoring fans can lead to an encounter more lucrative than the signing's appearance fee itself.

Run of the mill Street Circuit encounters make poor viewing, and only have a 50% chance of actually being screened. If they are, the appearance fee is just half of the sponsor's standard fee. On the other hand, dramatic or spectacular fights – particularly ones featuring well-known street Killers – may be worth twice as much as usual, and fees are always guaranteed and quadrupled for street fights to the death. There can be a down side of course – Killers are exempt from SLA prosecution, but the civil courts may still attempt to sue a Killer for excessive damage to private property or loss of civilian life. If undue negligence on the part of the Killer can be demonstrated, she may be liable for a fine of up to 10,000u.

Covert games often pay better than the Street Circuit encounters. Even fairly basic ones pay the standard appearance fee to the stalker and double to the stalked, and convoluted show-downs between famous names may yield five times that amount. There is often more than money at stake though, with offers of merchandise or credit if sponsors are the ones requesting the game.

Occasionally sponsors will offer rewards for taking out Killers sponsored by rival companies, or for killing their own people's high-profile rivals. These incentives typically range from 300 - 1000c, and are offered in secret, as they are in a legal grey area at best, and can tempt Killers into breaking the rules of the Circuit.

KILLERS ON A MISSION

"Mad, bad and dangerous to know? Only if you're on one of my Hunter Sheets, or facing me in an arena. Otherwise I'm a good girl. I do what I'm told, go where I'm sent, and kill who I'm told to kill. SCL doesn't mean shit to me. Ask anyone on the Circuit – my reputation gets me clearance when it's needed."

CryptAngel, SCL 9C-CK. Edited section from interview, not for broadcast.

Contract Killers are put across to the public as blood-lusting madmen, living only to bring death to their rivals. In reality, most Killers are combat businessmen, using their skills at showmanship and melee to give the public what it wants – an entertaining fight complete with winners and losers, good guys and bad guys. By their very nature however, unstable as they are, and with exemption from most of the usual rules and restrictions on behaviour, Killers need to be kept under control. This control is a very real part of the job – despite their apparent freedom, all Killers agree to obey their sponsors and SLA Industries. Immediately, and without question. To the letter. To the death, if required. Fortunately for Killers, individual Operatives and Corporates do not count as the company for these purposes, and an official SLA Industries order has to be counter-signed by a departmental head.

As a certified psychopath, a Killer is legally considered a menace to society whose execution has been put on hold while he remains useful to the company. That's part of the Killers' Contract, and not a part that the authorities draw attention to in advance. Failure to obey a valid order is considered proof that the Killer has stopped being useful, and the stay of execution is withdrawn. Every Killer has a signed and sealed termination warrant already on file, just waiting for the date stamp. A Killer's sponsors will have plenty of unpleasant work waiting for him, and SLA itself will do as well. Wilful failure to complete generally involves a brief meeting with a squad of Dark Finders, and a one-way trip to the Necropolis.

SECURITY CLEARANCE

Contract Killers have their SCL effectively 'locked' at 11, giving them employee status within SLA Industries, with no real authority or presence within the SLA hierarchy and, especially, with no access to information. The Killer's actual SCL still kept as current for use in inter-area access within Mort and

communication within the chain of command. Killers' SCLs are properly listed with a CK suffix, but few people make the effort.

If the Contract Killer needs to get in to SCL-restricted areas, their official rating is used to grant or deny access – although their reputation will work just as well for them (or against them). Unofficially, Rep 1 maps to SCL 11 and Rep 10+ to SCL 2, at least when it comes to getting into places or making contact with officials. SLA Industries knows that while in such areas, the Killer will only have eyes for their targets, skilfully ignoring anything else from their environment that could be considered as information they didn't need to know. Killers who flaunt the Knowledge Fine system are few and far between. Sponsors just don't pay that well, and eventually the 'fine' takes the form of a compulsory mission or Hunter Sheet.

Internal Affairs regularly scrutinises Third Eye footage from Hunter Sheets, contests and challenges, games, and recreational activity, looking for clues that the Killer may have picked up information, or acted upon material that she could have only gained through restricted knowledge. The habit of being able to look the other way is one that every Killer soon learns to develop.

"I crept in to the lower levels of the factory hot on the tail of a RazorBack, tracked it down to the dark, dank storage levels below the cooling towers. Rooms full of bodies? All I saw were razor sharp fangs and claws bearing down on me out of the darkness, all muscle, spines and hooves. No time to think about anything else. I only just got my Gash Fist in front of me in time. Hey, look pal, I can tell you all about the fight, blow by blow. You want to know about anything else, you're talking to the wrong guy."

FruitBlade, SCL 8A-CK, to Matthew Raven, SCL 6B, from Operative squad Blind Fish.

For most Killers, the only way to rise in SCL is by accident. Sometimes the Killer will be hunting and cross the path of a squad of Ops on an active BPN. If she has time, and the networks aren't itching to get her into some down and dirty wetwork, the Killer may opt to aid the squad with a violent resolution to a BPN, on the basis that it should provide some airtime. Other times a squad will actively seek out the help of a particular Killer with a reputation for operating in a particular sector. Then the Killer can gain some good air time and enhanced image by helping out the loyal servants of SLA, especially if it's with some climactic violence towards the end of an investigatory BPN. In either case, being in at the end of the BPN will be worth a standard 0.1 SLC increase. These increases are recorded by Third Eye, reported to SLA and monitored by Internal Affairs. Killers that spend too much time looking to increase their SCL level are useless to SLA Industries though, and so are quickly rooted out and dealt with. The Cannibal Sectors can be a lonely place to hunt.

THE CORPORATE DEVIL

A sponsor invests a lot of money and image in its Killers, so it's no surprise that companies are determined to get their full value for money from their investments. That means making full use of a Killer for their guaranteed time, in any way that they can. The duties involved can range from the mind-numbingly tedious to the insanely dangerous, often switching from one to the other in the blink of an eye. Almost all Killers bitterly resent their assignments, but they are unavoidable. If a sponsor's assignments are particularly unpleasant, it is possible for a Killer to switch to a new sponsor, but it takes a lot of work so agents discourage it. Besides which, until you become a super-star, there's no guarantee anyone else will be any better.

Sponsoring a Killer entitles the sponsor sub-company or department to 30 hours of that Killer's time a week, or 10 hours if the sponsorship is only partial. The hours worked are usually agreed in discussions between the sponsor and the Killer's agent. These may be the same hours every week without fail, or they might be decided on each day on a case-by-case basis. If the two parties disagree, the sponsor has the right to choose any times he wishes, up to the weekly maximum, so long as the Killer has no fights already booked in that time. If a particularly peculiar or malicious sponsor demands the Killer's presence for one hour every six hours day and night, there's nothing the Killer can do except learn how to catnap and try to persuade his agent to find him a new sponsor. Outside of that time, the Killer is free to fight, party, make appearances, do independent work, sleep, and generally go about their life.

In general though, sponsors do what they can to maximise the return they get from their Killers. The economics of the situation take priority over personal whims most of the time. A happy and dedicated Killer is going to be more profitable for the sponsor in the long run than a truly aggravated one. The same sort of policies decide the work that the Killers actually end up doing. Their primary value to a sponsor lies in marketing and promotion, so most of their assignments reflect that. Keeping a high profile, meeting the fans and spreading the word about new products and initiatives are generally seen as the most useful work for a Killer to be kept busy with. By raising the sponsor's profile, Killers boost sales and public good-will. Reputation plays a part, naturally. The higher a Killer's Rep, the more valuable their image and endorsements are. At high Reps, a fair chunk of power passes back to the Killer, because their promotional time is too profitable to risk screwing with, and there are always queues of would-be new sponsors trying to part the Killer from her old contracts, so any particularly onerous duty may result in a sponsor losing their asset. For everyone else however, it's just an unpleasant side of the game that everyone keeps fairly well-hidden from the public eye.

Even with all the economic pressure to make the most off a Killer, some sponsors are strange, irritable, unpleasant, perverse or downright malicious, and not all assignments are easy to tolerate.

KILLERS ON A MISSION



Sponsors seeking to abuse their Killers usually pay a hefty 'management fee' to the Killer's agent to make sure that requests for a sponsorship transfer keep getting lost in the filing. If a Killer dies on a sponsor's assignment, the agent receives a generous 'Death Bonus' in compensation for the loss of earnings, but if a Killer has to be executed by Cloak Division for refusing to obey a sponsor's orders then the agent gets nothing, so agents are sympathetic to sponsor's needs.

Most assignments involve promotional activity. This sort of PR work includes the stereotypical signing of sponsor's merchandise in a mall or other public venue, making an appearance at a particular store or outlet, visiting schools and colleges to talk about life on the circuit (and the sponsor's products), filming adverts for the sponsor's goods, and so on. Other typical duties include internal business functions, such as meeting important clients and suppliers, or turning up at company events to help boost staff morale. This type of work bores most Killers to tears, but it at least has the advantage of being relatively easy.

Other assignments are more dramatic. Although SLA Industries frowns upon the more extreme examples, it is well known that most sponsoring sub-companies use their Killers to weaken their corporate rivals. Killers may be ordered to criticise a rival companies products, policies and/or personnel on air, stopping just short of actual libel. Public demonstrations of revulsion, where a Killer destroys goods or replica staff belonging to a rival company, are common. More subtle action, such as completely boycotting everything and anyone associated with a rival company, is continual for all Killers. But some sub-companies feel the need to go that little bit further.

Although it is technically illegal, Killers have been sent on sabotage missions to rival offices, told to threaten a rival's clients and suppliers, and even forced to murder rival sub-company directors and employees. These sorts of assignments are kept unofficial, with the understanding that refusal will bring an official order to go and redecorate the cannibal sectors. The legal situation is murky; Killers are – by legal definition – psychopathic. Occasional excess of this sort brings the standard fine for the Killer (repaid by the sponsor, normally) and a rap on the knuckles for all concerned; continued abuse may lead to the Killer's execution, and even a Cloak investigation into the sponsor. As Agents forfeit their Death Bonus if the Killer is executed, they tend to dislike their Killers being given this sort of work. A generous bribe can smooth the way, particularly for a new or insignificant Killer. This tendency towards escalation means that many Killers find themselves spending their allotted time on guard duty, acting as bodyguards for top executives, site guards for research and production facilities, or even security staff for office buildings.

Some people are simply unpredictable, however. A Killer shackled to an unusual sponsor may find herself doing all sorts of peculiar, unpleasant or surprising work. Many different assignments have

been recorded by Third Eye teams. Unsurprisingly, a few sponsors demand that their Killers provide sexual access to executives, important clients, general staff stress relief and even paying members of the public. Others may send a Killer to befriend (or even seduce) someone that they need information, favours or assistance from. This sort of extended assignment can also form part of an attempt to recruit a particular person, discover client lists, or gain access to other sensitive material. If the sponsor is short-handed, a Killer may even be drafted in to help around the office. More than one Killer has found himself stuck filing reports and taking memos for thirty hours each week. A few Killers even end up on factory floors, working in manual production lines. The oddest use for a Contract Killer however was recorded in 833SD, when the chief executive of a small telemarketing operation called DDM ordered a Killer to strip naked, do a shoulder-stand and lower his legs back towards the floor so that the executive could use him as an ink-well.

This case illustrates the final danger of pushing a Killer too hard. Even though killing a representative of your sponsoring company has been punishable by execution ever since, Killers are psychotic, and sometimes they no longer care.

THE COMPANY LINE

In addition to their corporate duties, Contract Killers are also considered to be at the disposal of SLA Industries at all times and – with a little negotiation between the interested party and agent – by any other SLA department or sub-company with the funding. Some Departments, such as Recreation, actually prefer assignments to BPNs. Receiving a SLA assignment is both a compliment to one's abilities and a reminder that the Killer is under the company thumb.

Contract Killers regard SLA assignments with mixed emotions, since it balances the advantage of a non-competition environment with the restrictions of rigid operating parameters. These parameters are often very specific, and failure in any detail can be grounds for a black mark on the Killer's record. Refusing SLA is even more serious than refusing your sponsor. There are three basic categories of SLA assignments available:

UltraViolence Assignments: An UltraViolence (or "Ultra-V") mission is a graphic demonstration of the penalty for subversion or incompetence. The best description of an Ultra-V is the punishment and termination of a target (or objective) in the bloodiest, most spectacular way possible. Contract Killers with particularly wild or sadistic public images receive more than their share of this type of assignment. Examples include raids on Darknight cells, execution of prominent subversives, and Sour Blood's attempted assault in 898 SD on the Depth Charge, to clear out Darknight Props.

Suicide Missions: A suicide mission, also called a "bodybagger", is the equivalent of Black BPN for a Contract Killer and is usually the end of their career. There are two common ways that one is



issued – either the recipient has fallen into disfavour with sponsors and is being “cashed in”, or the possible benefits of a difficult mission outweigh the Killer's market value. In instance of the former, the chance of surviving is as near to zero as possible; if the latter, the odds of survival are at least non-zero, but are still slim, and the character will be pushed beyond his capabilities. If the Contract Killer does survive and completes the mission, he receives an immediate increase in Rep, and is considered to be back in everyone's good books. The stereotypical bodybagger missions are being ordered to kill Halloween Jack or to assault a Thresher base world.

PR Tasks: A PR Task is a high profile assignment that places a Contract Killer in the media light outside of an arena. The equivalent of a Silver BPN, these rely more upon a CK's charm and presence than combat prowess. PR missions often involve politically useful public appearances, special media features or bodyguarding jobs.

As a Contract Killer's popularity rises, potential sponsors and organizers carefully observe his performance and note his abilities. Once distinguished from the rest, benefits begin to materialize, including the privilege of decent assignments. Contract Killers will not receive one until their reliability and skill has been tested. UltraViolence and PR Missions are usually given to those with talents best suited for a particular assignment. For instance, a Killer known for defeating groups of opponents simultaneously may draw “Sweep and Clears” against DN cells, while those with an impressive image might get bodyguard duty for a media icon. Of course, suicide missions and degrading PR tasks might be presented to any Killer who irritates, embarrasses, disobeys or aggravates his sponsors or agent, regardless of how long he has been active.

GETTING OUT

There are some things you can retire from, and there are some things you can't. Depending on how you've done in your time, the Contract Circuit can be either of these things. If you've been neither too good nor too bad they'll simply let you go – it is not worthwhile to make a fuss over whether or not you exist. The problem comes when you have made an impression in the time that you've been in the Circuit. If you've been good for ratings, and constantly draw the crowds, Third Eye won't want you to retire. It is usually easier to offer more money, free implants, free whatever you want to get you to stay. If this fails, there are always alternatives such as threat and blackmail. If none of these work, it is the usual procedure to judge what would be the best (read: most profitable) means of disposing of their former asset. Reclassification to non-exempt status and a job as a presenter, journalist, trainer or Circuit official is one way out; a vicious grudge match is another.

Killing unsanctioned targets, multiple accidental deaths as a result of incompetence or negligence, or breaking the rules of any

particular engagement (firearms in a melee contest and so forth) will all count against you when the time comes for the lords of the Circuit to decide your fate. When a Killer does retire from the circuit, her exemption certificate is revoked immediately and she is returned to Operative status. The SCL restrictions are removed, and any intellectual property rights in your Circuit character revert to the Circuit administration. These image privileges can only be reinstated for guest appearances on the circuit, and then only at the discretion of the administration. People interested in statistics may like to know that approximately half of the Killers entering the circuit survive to retirement.

DEATH BONUSES

Death has always been a part of the circuit – some would say the greatest part of it – but as with all things, death has a price. The Killer usually reaps the benefit of the deaths that she causes, but what happens when she dies?

There are two different types of Death Bonus payable to the Agent upon a Killer's death, and which applies is specific to the type of conflict. If the Killer can be revived by LAD following a fatal injury in a Circuit match, no bonus is payable to the agent unless the nature of the injuries keep the Killer out of the Circuit for an extended period of time. An example of this was when Chuerrin smashed a new Killer, Varn, into little pieces. Enough was recovered for the LAD teams to revive Varn, but the sheer amount of reconstruction involved put him out for three months for psychological counselling. During this time, Chuerrin's Agents were required to pay Varn's Agent a sum equal to his cut of the fees that Varn would have been expected to earn.

The second type of Death Bonus kicks in when no LAD is possible – either because the match rules forbid it (a True Death grudge match), the injuries are too severe, or the Killer was on a bodybagger assignment. In cases like these, a deceased client nets the Agent the equivalent of a month's wages per point of Rep that the Killer had. For example, a Rep 5 Killer would yield five months of wages (monthly value calculated as the mean average of the Agent's monthly profit from that Killer over the last six months) in compensation for her death. This fee is payable by the Agent of the victorious Killer (for a match) or by the sub-company or department that authorised the assignment (for a bodybagger), so Agents and Sponsors take out kill insurance on their fighters – that way, if a Killer costs them a fortune in compensation, they will at least have some way to reclaim the money.

Agents have been known to sabotage their fighters' equipment in order to get a Death Bonus – perhaps because the Agent requires some financial liquidity. This is frowned upon, however.



THE GAME

They say there's a ghost haunting the circuit.

But I'm being rude. Allow me to introduce myself - I'm a man of wealth and fame... Actually, that's not strictly true. I'm a man of would-be wealth and fame, if I'm honest. My name is Todd Argus, but you may have heard of my arena title - Hunter. I've been part of the Contract Circuit for five months. The whole ghost thing comes from a strange encounter (of the very earthly kind) that I had about three months ago, when I was in the dressing room just prior to a scheduled fight.

The winner of the previous match wandered in to the room, and came over to me.

Johnny Automatic.

There's something about him. I don't know where it comes from exactly, but he has this almost tangible aura of competence. It enters the room five minutes before he does. He surprised me further by sitting down opposite me.

"Todd, Yes?" His voice was quiet, like the whisper of a sword leaving its scabbard.

"Yessir." It pays to be meek, sometimes.

He smiled, a swift quirk at the left side of his mouth. Almost too quick to notice. "How are you finding the Circuit?"

Not the question I was expecting. "Uh, fine..."

"Good, good." He leant forwards, resting his elbows on his knees. "Do you know about the ghost?"

For a mad second, I wondered if a friend had put him up to trying to freak me out, but my friends didn't have that much clout.

"Uh, no... What ghost?"

"The one prowling in Downtown." He motioned me closer in a conspiratorial fashion. "You'll know when its near, you can't mistake it."

"What does it look like?" A stupid question, but I was off-balance.

"No one knows. No-one has ever seen it clearly."

"How do you know there is one then?"

His smile quirked again, and he winked, quickly, almost a twitch. "I know."

I didn't know if he was joking or not. He left just before the match, wishing me well as he went. I won, but Automatic had troubled me a little. Sure, everyone's heard ghost stories, but he was so definite that one existed, and with his reputation... I'd never heard that his time on Dante had addled his brain.

Just the opposite, in fact. He was supposed to be amazingly sane. Heh. For a Contract Killer, anyway.

I decided to do a bit of digging into it, looking at things. Unofficially, of course. I didn't really need another fine. Anyway, a little birty eventually tolged me that there was something new lurking in Downtown. There has been a number of unexplained - for Downtown - disappearances in the last few months. High-security places, people vanishing mid-fight, things like that. Interesting, but what the hell - it's Downtown, right?

Still, life in the Circuit could never be accused of being dull. Between the various types of matches, the massive variety of opponents, and the nasty duties on the side, anyone saying that they're bored is lying. A couple of weeks later, I got scheduled for a "Last Man Standing" in the sewers beneath Milton Sector in Downtown. That piqued my curiosity, as the last few 'ghost' disappearances had occurred in the vicinity of Milton. I checked the listings of the fighters involved. There was only one fighter of note, but it made me think twice. The killer in question was Screech, one of the most terrifying - if not the most terrifying - of the killers on the circuit today. Sadly, backing out wasn't an option.

"Last Man Standing" contests are usually fairly straightforward - kill, knock out or incapacitate everyone else. This one allowed firearms, and you could quit at any time by getting to the official exit and declaring surrender. Not a great policy, that.

Once in the dark of the Sewers, I activated low-light and infra-red vision systems, and prepared my silenced hand cannon. I hate sewer arenas. They're just a walking advertisement for death in the darkness, but I've fought in them quite a bit, so I had a better chance than most. I started off quietly down the main tunnel, in the middle of the sewage. My armour was fully sealed, and as much as I find it distasteful to be neck deep in shit, I also knew from experience that few people would pay the muck as much attention as they should.

Up ahead in the tunnel, I spotted some movement. Very little of it though, and nothing showed up on infrared.

I see him.

I cycled through my various visual options. Nothing showed up at the end of the tunnel, but there had definitely been something there. You have to be able to be sire, because a trick of the eyes down here gets people killed.

The weak shall be destroyed.

I moved forwards slowly, only my eyes above the sewage. Up ahead, whatever it was shifted position slightly.

It is not yet his time. I will take one of the others for now.

The thing was moving away. It didn't seem to be one of us, so I decided to let it go. I heard movement to the right though; one of my competitors was coming down a side tunnel. With a shoulder-mounted light blazing away on the surface of the water, no less. Muppet. I switched to AP rounds and drew a line of sight on the flashlight. The moment of confusion when the light shattered would be enough.

My first round smashed the light. The second two took the target dead centre in the chest. He staggered backwards, and my next round took him just under the chin. He dropped like a stone into the sewage. A few seconds later, the body floated past, so I quickly checked what was left of the face. He was definitely dead. I continued down a different tunnel, still not coming above the level of the sewage. Infra red showed another target coming down the pipe. The sewage had become a little more solid, and I didn't think I could fire accurately without standing up first.

I bunched my legs beneath me and prepared to pounce. As the target turned away from me, I launched upwards. The person turned, far more quickly than I anticipated, and I could see the red dot of a targeting laser suddenly splashing my chest.

Just as quickly as the person had turned to face me, they turned again and ran. I put a single round into the back of his or her helmet, for show really. Then I started thinking that I wasn't that scary. No-one would have run from me. If they weren't running from me...

"SSSSSSCCCCCCCCRRRRRRREEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAG
GGGHHHHH."

The warning of imminent death nearly burst my eardrums, and it certainly overcame my bladder control. I span, bringing my cannon up to bear on the beast. It was a good two feet taller than me and a foot broader, and it was wearing the head of one of the other fighters on its left shoulder.

Effortlessly smashing my gun away, it hammered me ten feet backwards. I scrambled to my feet - ripping my sword from its MagHold - and prepared to sell my life as dearly as I can.

"SSSSSSCCCCCCCCRRRRRRREEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAG
GGGHHHHH."

It seethed towards me up the sewer like a tidal wave. I slashed out horizontally, cutting it across the middle, and then vertically, marking it into quarters. The four sections quivered, but just sealed back up again. A sudden burst of light dazzled me, then it must have lashed out again, because I flew backwards. I landed sitting in the sewage, my sword gone. My chest felt wet. I looked down to see that the chest plate had been smashed open. Diseased filth was seeping in, contaminating my wounds no doubt.

"SSSSSSCCCCCCCCRRRRRRREEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAG
GGGHHHHH."

At that moment, I was sure that I wasn't going home.

This is worthy prey, this I will take.

I scrambled upright again, determined to die on my feet. My chest felt like someone had been using it as a cutlery drawer. I tensed, waiting for the inevitable deathblow, but somehow, miraculously, it didn't arrive. As my vision readjusted, I discovered I was alone. Far down the corridor, I could hear soft smacking sounds of flesh on flesh, a wet tearing noise like meat being ripped, and another deafening screech. I spotted my sword on the walkway, grabbed it, and ran. I'm not sure if they got time to identify me at the north exit; I certainly didn't stop to talk it over. I just fled topside, and got my controller to send in a medical team.

Three days later, I was still recuperating in the hospital when I had a surprising visitor. Once again, I didn't seem to have the right words to say. He sat on the edge of the bed, which creaked nastily under the weight of his armour.

"So how you doing, boy?" he asked.

"Oh, fine," I muttered.

"Heard you had a run in with Screech." I wasn't a question, so I didn't answer it. He paused for a second, then leant forwards to continue. "Wetbacks that go up against that thing don't tend to come out to talk about it."

"No, sir," I agreed.

"So what happened?"

"Why not?", I thought. "I'm not certain. I was dead meat for sure, and then it just stopped attacking."

"Did you see anything?"

"No. Something distracted it. I just bugged out and ran."

"Indeed." He flashed that smile again. "Still, it'd be good for you to know who you owe a favour to, wouldn't it?"

I nodded quietly. He didn't get up to leave, and I figured that maybe he'd give me a few hints if I was bold enough to ask.

"Mr Automatic, sir, may I ask you how you've survived as long as you have?"

"Are you in the press?" he asked, glancing wryly at me as I shook my head. "Then I'm called Johnny. As for how I've survived, you mean besides the several decades of combat experience and ten years on Dante?"

I blushed. "Uh, yeah."

"It's all a game, lad. You've just got to know how to play." He smiled softly, and got up to leave. "I'll be seeing you." I

couldn't think of anything quickly enough to stop him leaving.

Three days later, I was ready for the next game. My agent had booked me for a 'First Blood', this time. There were quite a few big names on it - Sour Blood, Deity, Screech (just peachy), and The Bond. A big coup for me, but coming up against Screech twice in a row was suspicious. There were also five other little people like me. The contest was scheduled for the next day.

My first priority was to go over the others. Deity I didn't need to check on. Consummate professional, one of the best. Same went for Screech, I was just going to have to try to stay out of its way. The Bond is Shaktarian, bound by their customs, so it was likely he'd be looking to go toe to toe. The worst one was Sour Blood - big, mean, fights dirty. He was most likely to prove the greatest threat. There were hardly any interesting details on the other low-rank fighters - one was a knife-fighter; another liked ambushes - so I was going to have to improvise.

I checked the odds - always worth-while. Deity was odds on favourite at 5-4. The Bond was second at 3-1. I scored in at a humiliating 50-1. As a side note, the odds for one or more accidental death were somewhat stacked in Screech's favour at a worrying 4-1. The contest was scheduled for lower Downtown, and naturally no Details or maps were available. Bloody perfect.

After a good night's sleep, I was as ready as I ever would be. We were all assigned entry points into the area, so I made my way to mine. Checking the final list, I saw a last minute cancellation. Sour Blood wasn't going to make it. It looked like some unranked rookie in Uptown gave him a groin strain or something. Flicking on down, I saw that he had been replaced by Chuerrin. Well, I knew plenty about him - big, mean, with the worst brutality and 'accidental' death record of the whole circuit. I decided to try to stay away from him as well. I could see why he had taken the fight though. He's obviously wasn't scared of the fighters involved. Downtown is the perfect area for close quarter specialists, and he's certainly that.

We didn't have locators for the contest, so it was going to be down to who spotted who first. Once I was in the designated fight zone, I found myself a handy bit of rubble half-filling one of the upper walkways, and paused there for a moment. A faint buzzing disturbed me and I span round, sword ready. A small spot-bee drone was hovering behind me, not more than five inches from my head. Damn nuisances those things, but they're part of the package, and the handlers know not to give your position away. I tried not to think about the kind of bribe money Screech could muster, and went back to watching the lower levels through the walkway grid. It wasn't

any use - it had been a pretty vain hope anyway - and after a bit, I headed back down towards the action.

I remember that things were strangely quiet. The briefing had confirmed that the area was considered notionally occupied, a temporary Circuit zone visiting the levels. It was odd, especially for a contest like this. On the second level from zone bottom, I heard a roar from around a corner and shortly afterwards, a body dressed in battered armour flew across the street, landing in a tangled heap on the mesh. A huge figure stomped across the way and picked the body up from where it had landed, raised it above its head, then smashed it over his knee.

Chuerrin.

The life signs went dead on one of the contestant monitors, but the beeper to mark the end of the contest didn't go off. I began to understand why people were so scared of this beast. This First Blood contest was running literally until the first bleeding injury on a target. Each contestant was being monitored to make sure that as soon as any blood loss was recorded, the contest could be halted and the winner announced. It's a fairly standard way of keeping the contest non-lethal. Chuerrin had just killed someone without making him or her bleed. Nice touch. He turned towards me and began lumbering up the walkway. I could feel the hairs standing up on the back of my neck. I glanced backwards and realised that there was something in the shadows of a doorway behind me.

He knows I am here.

My attention was drawn back to the horrendous monster that was stomping up the walkway towards me. Then there was a blur of motion from the side, and another figure - almost the same size as Chuerrin - launched out of a corridor and barrelled into him, knocking him aside. I raised my sword, looking for a chance of a sneak attack - either one of them would have done - but I didn't want to just close with them. I took up position on the edge of the walkway, preparing to rush whichever one came out with his back to me.

I will take this one now.

Suddenly, I had that feeling again. I glanced backwards, but there was nothing there, so I returned to watching the walkway ahead. A soft thump behind me announced a new arrival, and before I had a chance to turn round...

"SSSSSSCCCCCCCCRRRRRRREEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAG
GGGHHHHH."

My bladder went again - embarrassing when you're wired with a full-body fluid monitor. I could imagine the commentary.

I span round, sword at my side. It was standing there, far more horrific now I could see it clearly. It was a mass of

internal organ textures and organic knives, constantly in motion like some living machine. It leant forwards to stare directly at me, no more than a few inches from my face. It was clearly enjoying itself. One of its many limbs shot out to knock my sword from me yet again. Another limb formed a large blade.

"SSSSSSCCCCCCCCRRRRRRREEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAG
GGGHHHHH."

I jumped again - I think the way that the sound comes from low on it's body takes me by surprise; no mouth movement, you see - and pure rage and humiliation washed all thought away. I leapt backwards, raising my arm as if to ward it off. It advanced quickly, harrying me. I fell back, grabbing my reserve blade from the maghold on my shin, and lunged. If we had been in a cartoon, Screech would have had a large question mark hanging over its head right about then.

"Asshole." It's all I had time for.

The blade took it straight in what should have been a face, and it catapulted back in reflex shock even as I overbalanced and collapsed. It was up in less than a second and charging towards me, a dark apparition from the nightmares I had as a child.

There are too many now, but his time will come.

"No."

The voice came from behind me, and as I watched in amazement, a single red dot appeared on Screech's chest. It reluctantly slowed to a halt. I looked down at the monitor, and was amazed to see that I had won. Screech had bled for a whole 0.6 seconds before healing. I looked backwards to see Deity sighting the thing down a long rifle barrel. Screech seemed to understand that Deity had got the drop on it, and backed away, flowing down the walkway like a pool of congealing blood. I got up and looked back. Deity shouldered his rifle and nodded at me, raising one thumb in acknowledgement. "Nice." He turned and walked up the passage.



SUPPORT NETWORKS

“Oh, don’t get me started. I’m up there fighting my arse off, getting all cut to ribbons and risking death at every moment, and somehow I seem to be making everyone else rich. They’re just bloody vampires, I tell you. Filthy, scheming bastards. I hate them all. Oh, um, except for my agent of course, she’s cool. And my sponsor, Red Dogs Chilli. They’re the best, and there’s no dogmeat in them, no matter what that Channel 36 report said. Uh, and the medical teams, ‘cos we’d all be fucked without them. I guess I owe the scout that found me a big one, too. And the Refs – it’s a really hard job – and the administration for keeping it all together, and...”

“Mad Max” Bantleman, SCL 6C, narrowly avoiding a punitive assignment to lowest Downtown

It takes a lot of time and effort to organise something as complicated as the Contract Circuit. On top of the administrative support required to regulate the Killers, keep track of their matches and Reps and deal with all the ins and outs of sponsorships and appearance fees, the whole structure of an arena match requires a lot of work. There are a lot of different corporate functions involved, and that means a lot of snouts in the trough. The Circuit makes a vast amount of money, so there are a lot of people fighting for a share of the action.

AGENTS

To be on the Circuit, you have to be able to fight. What people don’t realise is that to be the best, someone has to do the paperwork. Most Killers couldn’t even if they wanted to. To make sure that everything runs smoothly, there are a number of Circuit-sponsored Agents, who deal solely in Killers new to the Circuit. These Agents are both expensive and disinterested in their clients’ career, because their money is secured and they know that as soon as they get noticed, their Killers will move to a different agency. These introductory Agents tend to be either new to the job themselves, or talentless enough to have never risen any further, and either way they aren’t much use.

Killers wanting to progress above the bottom rung need to retain the services of one of the better Agents. Positions with someone more professional are strictly by invitation only, but ‘proper’ Agents routinely employ people to scan the lower orders, looking for Killers with have the skill to succeed. They will try and get promising talent as cheaply as possible, but they are all aware of competitors who might make better offers. The most prestigious agents are the ones who represent the stars – such as Truman Burns, who manages a house of fifty Killers (over thirty of them at Rep 8, 9 or 10). These are the Agents who can get a Killer onto any vid channel, into any fight, or invited to any party. However, to gain access to the very best Agents, you have to be the very best



yourself – or at least be nearly there and have the potential to go all the way.

Agents vary in style and operating procedure, and if one has noticed you, it is often possible to use that attention as leverage to make a deal with a competing firm. Provided that your talent is sufficient for the circles the Agent moves in and he has an opening on his books, he will often take you on. In all things however, obedience is critically important. If you do not do what your Agent tells you to, you may very well find yourself being dumped, and without an Agent, you are doomed to obscurity. Few are prepared to risk this fate, because nothing will end your career faster than being stuck on the Street Circuit with no-one to back you up.

In many ways, Agents are the most powerful people on the Circuit. Agents command a great deal more respect on the Contract Circuit than any other corporate simply because they have access to the largest amounts of money, muscle and star talent. Successful Agents are considerably richer than the Killers they manage. With money to burn on security, promotions, buying new Killers, medical care, bribery and assorted dirty deals, Agents have only one real enemy on the Circuit—other Agents.

People seldom come into direct conflict with Agents. This is usually through choice, but it can prove very difficult to get close enough to one for confrontation to be possible. Undesirables

trying to get to the Agent will be stopped by corporate assistants, security guards or both.

Agents have many advantages in the Circuit community. Most people look up to them as the top powers of the Circuit. This is often true. They are in a very stable position, seldom being open to financial attack. Most Agents are under constant investigation because of their corrupt business practices, but their ranks are very tight and infiltration is practically impossible. With an impressive network of spies and informants both inside and outside the Contract Circuit, Agents know all about official moves that might threaten them. No Agent would betray another to Cloak Division or any other investigative force, no matter how much they hated each other. They all have too much to hide themselves.

HUNTERS

Some of the more bizarre tournament matches feature special attractions captured by Contract Hunters, the exclusive Killers who travel the World of Progress searching for strange and dangerous creatures. Manichines, giant insects, outlandish monstrosities – anything goes, just as long as the audience will encounter something they have never seen before. Any Killer may attempt to become a Hunter, but only the best can convince Agents and sponsors that without them, the ranks of the Hunters remain woefully incomplete.

Killers who manage to retrieve creatures which end up being used in the Circuit can make vast amounts of money. It is extremely dangerous, however. Many Hunters are ex-Ops, reformed serial Killers or War World survivors who enjoy the danger of stalking and eventually capturing monsters. Anyone keen to sign up can either try to join a group of Hunters or stump up the money for the expedition and go it alone, but do it unsanctioned and you may find that you don't have a job to come back to.

Contract Hunters are a special type of Killer who work almost exclusively for the Circuit. They are responsible for the capture and preparation of 'special features'. These acquisitions can and do come in all shapes and sizes, from carnivorous pigs and reprogrammed Manichines, to exotics like razorheads and vitchers. This is an extremely dangerous job, but it does have its perks – good travel, for example. Hunters charge very large amounts of money for the creatures they catch, but can often spend almost as much making their next catch.

The more experienced Hunters travel to the far flung reaches of the World of Progress in search of strange and unusual creatures that inhabit the many worlds. One of the favourite planets for Hunter activity is Jacinto. A Natural world two Fold Jumps from New Paris, this planet has remained as it was since before the Conflict Wars, and has a great diversity of wildlife, including highly-prized creatures such as nariks.



The biggest prizes for any Hunter however are to be found on a planet far from any form of civilisation. The Hunter that brings anything back from here is promised riches beyond all wildest dreams. There is only one problem – the planet has a SCL 1 lock-out on any form of travel even near it, and even its name is restricted by multiple D-Notices. This has not stopped at least three Hunters – all of whom are now retired – from finding a way to White Earth and back.

The levels of risk involved in the job have led to some of the Hunters becoming almost like the bounty hunters and mercenaries of the Conflict Wars. Such individuals are rather detached from SLA Industries, with little time for rules, regulations or Rep, and have been known to disappear for months on end without letting anyone where they are going or what they are up to. This has left Cloak Division with the difficult task of trying to keep track of these solitary Killers, attempting to make sure that what they are up to still can be justified as employment within SLA Industries. Unsurprisingly, Hunters are treated with suspicion by the SLA establishment, and with awe by most other people.

"To be an Operative is to become a hunter among the prey. To be a Contract Killer is to become a predator amongst the hunters."

Rishnar, Wraith Raider Contract Hunter, SCL 7A.2

MEDICAL TEAMS

The medical staff that work the Contract Circuit are technically employed to save Killers' lives, but you'd be hard-pressed to believe it. The various teams that work in the Circuit are some of the most frightening individuals found anywhere. These flocks of medical vultures come in all shapes and sizes, from small two-man units to fully organised companies with 50 or more employees. No matter what size the operation, every medical team is as cut-throat as the next. With so much at stake – medical fees, not lives – the individual teams are quite willing to not only under-cut the prices of their competitors, but also poison, stab and on the odd occasion shoot a rival medical team member or members. They also have a policy of extracting payment (or signature) before treatment, leading to the common spectacle of a Killer bleeding rapidly towards death while her medical team waves a piece of paper at her. The term 'vackal', a corruption of the words Vulture and Jackal, is widely as a nickname for these unpleasant individuals.

"The worst is covering the Circuit, man. I yell ya - those posers you see on the screen all the time are the biggest arseholes you'll ever meet. We risk our necks to get in there and patch them the best we can, then all they do is moan when their favourite suit gets spoilt, or some crazy bastard sprays blood all over them, and you end up getting smacked for it if they recognise you. Still, there's nothin' to beat a good GoreZone, eh?"

Art Reson, freelance medic



PUSHERS

Given the wide range of drugs now available on the market, trying to keep abreast of the most effective substance for a given purpose can be difficult. Pushers fill this niche, supplying the right drug at the right time – for a high cost. These individuals often work as an integral part of a vackal team. After all, the best time to sell healing drugs is when the Killer is lying on the floor haemorrhaging nastily.

Pushers are rarely made welcome by Agents or Killers when they appear in the arenas. They usually mean bad news, and dope tests at the end of competitions. Their drugs also tend to be unreliable. Only the most desperate accept a pusher's services.

Pushers do have their uses, however. Although they can be very dangerous to use – to both health and legal standing – they certainly can, and do, get their hands on some of the best drugs on any market, legal or illegal. Some are also trained in toxicology and pharmacology, and from time to time make up their own little concoctions for people who are more worried about money than about health. The failure rate of these home-brew drugs usually outweighs the theoretical benefits, and side-effects are both common and severe.

SECURITY

Crush a large amount of people into a small space. Add alcohol, and the potential to win (or lose) large amounts of money, and some sort of trouble is guaranteed. Because of this, the Contract Circuit establishment employs a very special security firm called The Institute. This organisation is made up of groups of Operatives on permanent Blue BPN to the Circuit, with the objective of keeping the crowd under control. Working in two person teams, one Stormer and one Brain Waster, these crews wander the various arenas, looking for trouble and violent situations. The Brain Waster of the team is the scout, and directs the Stormer to the site of the problem. It is not often that the teams actually throw anyone out of the Circuit, but severe beatings are common.

There are always foolish customers who feel the need to prove themselves better than the security teams. This can get rather messy, as the security teams carry weapons. Attacks with these have to be justified, and the paper work that has to be filled in after a fire fight does prevent most teams from using them without due cause. The Circuit is a brutal place, and it needs brutal peace-keeping. The Institute has been the subject of several Cloak Division investigations – they have a very poor public safety record – but the authorities have reached no conclusions. The security teams still operate without restriction.

The most notorious pair of Institute Ops – brutal enough to have their own fan club – are Boskii and Fry. They are widely considered to reside on the same moral level as Chuerrin, which is no mean feat. Although they've received 151 suspensions between them over the last few years, they aren't really much worse than any other Institute employees. The Institute recruits 'enterprising individuals', and Boskii & Fry are certainly that. They'll happily lie, take bribes, cheat and kill to better their sleazy lifestyles. An unfortunate role-model for a young Waster on her first assignment, Boskii was a bitter Stormer who failed to get into the Circuit as a Killer. He still resents those who make it in, focussing his hatred on anyone new enough to be bullied. He has managed to convince Fry that his bigotry and corruption are simply common sense, but she has no particular reason to be so warped. She may still have time to change.

The squads are armed with two unique weapons: the Institute Baton and the Suppression Pistol. The Baton is similar to the standard Shiver Riot Baton. The real difference is that the Institute Baton has three power settings, to deal with whatever size of individual the wielder comes across. Setting one is for normal targets, such as Humans, Wraiths, Ebons, and so on. Setting two is for slightly more dangerous targets: Frothers, Brain Wasters, trained Operatives, targets on drugs or those with Karma enhancements. The third setting is for the toughest targets, Stormers and strong Shaktars. Most security teams never take the Batons off of setting three, of course, "just to be on the safe side". By comparison, the Suppression Pistol is a defence weapon used



BozKii

AND
FRY.
XXX

to deal with large disturbances. The actual mechanics of the weapon are such that it deals little physical harm. Instead, it knocks its target unconscious. The only way that it can cause damage is if the weapon is used at point blank range.

Institute Baton

Weight: 2kg Black Market Cost: Not Available

	DMG	PEN	AD
Setting One	5	0	5
Setting Two	6	1	6
Setting Three	7	3	7

Suppresser Pistol

Weight: 3.7kg Black Market Cost: 12,000

SIZE	CLIP	CAL	ROF	Recoil	Range
P	20	10g	1/3	3	10m

Suppresser round

CALIBRE	DMG:	STD	AP	HP	HEAP	HESH
Unique	0*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	PEN:	STD	AP	HP	HEAP	HESH
	0*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

(special)* PHYS Roll at -17 to stay conscious

REFEREES

Arena referees have the worst job on the Circuit. These dedicated professionals have the dubious honour of making sure that the collected maniacs of the Circuit play by the rules. This can be very dangerous, as quite a lot of the Contract Killers don't actually know the rules; some do not even understand the idea of rules. For the most part, they just try and do as much physical damage to their opponent as possible. The referee is often reduced to trying to stop the participants killing each other, assuming the contest isn't to the death.

There are plenty of other duties that refs have to perform, of course. These include supervising the medical treatment of Killers so as to make sure no illegal drugs are used, and monitoring training to check that no Killers have unusual advantages – such as Karma augmentation – that are not registered with the Circuit Authorities. These tasks often pit referees against the Killers, trainers and Agents, but then again, so does enforcing the rules.

Referees are identifiable by their black uniforms. White shoulder bands indicate the rank of the referee. One white stripe represents a trainee, two stripes represents the rank of fully qualified referee or marshal, three bands is the mark of a senior referee, and a single thick white band represents a refereeing chief. For the most part, referees have a lot of their ringside duties taken care of by Spot-bee cameras. Using sophisticated computer programs designed to integrate with on-board optic systems, the Spot-bee's output is used to analyse a fight from its participants' motions. These drones are a boon to any referee, with one added advantage – you can't bribe or threaten a Spot-bee. Their popularity is growing, as referees become less willing to risk life and limb in order to adjudicate the more dangerous games.



Some Referees, especially juniors, have complained to the Circuit management that the Spot-bee is a job stealer, and that it is eroding the tradition of live Referees. Their case has been strengthened in light of several recent incidents of Spot-bees being tampered with. This has mostly been to fix a fight, but once or twice the Spot-bee has been programmed to actually kill a competitor – Circuit fight observation models come armed with a short-barrelled Power Reaper. Such weaponry can be useful to persuade Killers to quit when an 'Off' card doesn't seem to get the message across.

FRANCHISERS

The Circuit has great potential as a venue for advertising. This means that the job of franchiser – middle man between Killers and sponsor companies – can be very profitable. This is particularly true if the Franchiser can work out an agreement with the Contract Killer before the Killer's Agent steps in to take control. Franchisers usually try to work behind Agent's backs, but this never causes much open irritation. A franchiser offers the easiest way for Killers and their Agents to make money. Sponsorship deals are easy money for the Agent. Having a Killer wear a logo is simple.

The friction begins with the sponsorship contract. Franchisers are renown for their water-tight deals. Some cunning franchisers have managed to gain control of Contract Killers by writing 'forfeit of ownership' clauses into their sponsorship contracts. This only slips through if the Killer's Agent makes a mistake and doesn't read the small print. You can't trust anyone nowadays.

"Mr Slayer provides everything you desire. Money. Fame. Babes. Me? I just like to hurt things."

Lethe, Human Contract Killer, SCL 6C.4



RUNNERS

The Corporates that find themselves working the Circuit as administrative assistants have very little chance of making an impressive career out of it unless they leave the Circuit completely. The entire Corporate structure of the Circuit is designed to slow people's progress – the Agents at the top of the ladder try and hold onto the power they have for as long as possible.

The best way for the lower-ranked individuals to actually make something of their lives is to acquire a share of a Killer via a part-ownership deal, commonly known as a KLIP, a Killer Licensing and Involvement Permit. This gives the person owning the KLIP part of the responsibility to finance the Killer, but also entitles them to a share of the Killer's winnings and profits from sponsorship. Killers do not get any say in the matter, and are generally not informed at all. When a Killer's contract is sold to another Agent, all KLIPs are automatically redeemed and the people that hold them are paid compensation for lost earnings.

Agents sell KLIPs when they need money for projects that require an immediate cash injection. Issuing a KLIP can quite severely cut back on a Killer's profit margin, so Agents normally keep a couple of mediocre Killers on their books so they can use them for KLIPing. This is a kind of investment banking where the Killer is a form of living account, which Agents keep around so that they do not have to lose control of any of their top Killers in an emergency. Most of the actual paper work concerning the ownership of KLIPs and the attendant Killers is handled by the Corporate assistants that work the Circuit.

These junior Corporates – or Runners as they are known, because of the way that they are always on the move from Agent to bookie to hunter to Killer – are the errand boys and girls for the rest of the Circuit. This gives them access to more sensitive information than anybody else on the Circuit, but because of their low rank they tend to keep their collective mouths shut for fear of retribution. From time to time, they do let small pieces of information slip to whoever might need them, if suitably rewarded. The Runners that manage to build up a trade providing information may amass enough wealth to purchase a Killer's contract entirely, KLIP by KLIP, and become a minor agent themselves, starting with the KLIPped Killer as their first contract.

BOOKIES

Bookies are the lowest form of life in the Circuit. They handle all the gambling on the Killers, and work to locate potentially profitable new recruits and encourage them into the business. They are highly corrupt, devoting most of their time to bribing officials, medics, Contract Killers or referees in order to make sure that their profits remain high. Any time the betting is high, the bookies will be threatening, blackmailing, bribing and kidnapping

family members of anyone and everyone necessary to stack the odds in their favour. The whole concept of a fair fight is anathema to a Bookie – how could they make any money if they didn't know who was going to win? Needless to say, these seedy Corporates are not well thought-of. Their status remains low, but that just fuels their desire to succeed in any way they can. Every Bookie secretly wants to prove their importance to the Contract Circuit, and get their own back for all the sleights.

Bookies seldom gain the fame and fortune enjoyed by successful Agents, the social stature of Talent Scouts or the intimidating reputation of the Circuit Hunters, but they do leave their mark on the Contract Circuit as the most devious, underhanded, two faced lying toads ever to walk Mort. A fame of sorts.

Bookies make the majority of their cash from the feverish gambling that takes place on the Circuit. The amount of money that changes hands on the Circuit on a daily basis is extraordinary. A large proportion of it ends up in the SLA treasuries, as all takings from gambling are heavily taxed. Despite this, a good – that is, an unscrupulous, manipulative, creatively criminal – Bookie can make thousands of credits in a single day. This level of profit is essential, as Bookies usually find themselves in debt to a number of people for “services rendered”.

These debts do not deter the Bookies from looking for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the one big fixed match that will set them up for life. Chasing this dream leads many to take serious risks in their day-to-day business. The most common malpractice is fight rigging, which can prove to be very profitable indeed. It also can be very dangerous, as Agents and officials do not like fights fixed against them. If a Bookie has arranged a thrown fight in favour of one of the contestants and the charge can be proved, the standard and invariant penalty is to be automatically thrown off the Contract Circuit and never allowed to return.

Being excommunicated from the Circuit is the single worst thing that could happen to a Bookie—they are ill-equipped to fend for themselves in the ‘real’ world of Corporate life. The essential tools that most Corporates learn, such as how to make the proper connections, how to survive office politics, and how to manage projects, are never important in the close-knit world of the Circuit. Needless to say, an ex-Bookie does not last long. The Circuit is their home, social circle, family and, to all intents and purposes, their entire life.

TALENT SCOUTS

The scouts hold a rather strange position in the structure of the Contract Circuit. They tend to be extremely unpopular with Circuit Corporates as their main goal is to recruit civilians into SLA as Operatives, taking them away from the Contract Circuit. They view the Circuit as a great waste of talent, and do their best to siphon off the most promising civilian fighters as mainstream Operatives. They also spend a great deal of time trying to

persuade SLA Killers to get their exemption rescinded and return to normal BPN work. Unsurprisingly, this causes a great deal of friction.

When a known talent scout is seen wandering through one of the arenas, most of the Bookies and Agents hurry their fighters out of the way, or get their security to run interference so as to stop the scout talking to the Killers. This has led to rather bloody confrontations, as scout bodyguards come up against Agent and Bookie security teams.

Some scouts enjoy working the Contract Circuit. They find that the constant need to improve the standard of the Killers that they evaluate is more satisfying than just making sure the person meets the ‘standard requirements’ for a job as an Operative. One of the less savoury aspects of talent scout work is called ‘sharking’, though. This only comes about as part of a specific (and fairly illicit) deal between the scout and an Agent. These agreements tend to involve the use of the scout as a spy to undermine a rival Agent’s Killers. This can be achieved in a number of ways. The most popular is to convince the Killer that they should leave their present Bookie or Agent and go and to work for the Agent that the scout represents. If the Killer finalises the termination of their contract with their old employer without getting a new one signed first – as they are encouraged to do – they are just dropped by the scout. This leaves the Killer without an Agent and, more often than not, without money. The Killer will now have to work extremely hard to either find a new contract or crawl back to their old Agent and beg for a renewal. Whichever way it goes, the process greatly hampers both the Killer and their Agent, and costs a lot of money. On the other hand, many such ‘headhunter’ deals are genuine, with talent scouts being commissioned to recruit a specific Killer for an Agent. When head-hunting, a scout will talk to any person close to the target to try to learn about levers or weaknesses, lying and manipulating as necessary, in order to make sure that they can fill their contract.



*“Bubblegum parade.
Toxic coloured lip shade.
She'll pin you with her
sharp needle eyes.
So quick, so harsh.
Tough yet so forever fluffy.
'Nightshade' is her middle name.
She's a girl with deadly fame.”*

*‘Thin As Fuck’, by the
Downtown Girls*

THE DIRECTORY

NOTE: This gallery contains some of the most noteworthy celebrities currently fighting on the Contract Killers. They span the different personalities and types to be found on the Circuit in Mort. Remember however that Contract Killers come and go, and just one week could be enough to totally change all the information in this chapter. GMs should feel entirely free to twist and warp these characters as they see fit, until they have something that they want to use.

UPTOWN CHURLS

CHUERRIN – (STORMER, REP 9)

Third Eye have characterised Chuerrin as a brutal monster who uses the Circuit as an excuse to legally kill and maim. They're right. Chuerrin is an abomination from the vats of Phantom Pregnancy, created without any effective social conditioning. Its only interest is the thrill of blood and death. It has the worst disciplinary record on the Circuit and the most suspensions ever from the Arena (48 in 904SD so far, and he's aiming for 50 by the end of the year).

Originally, Chuerrin was a prototype for a new breed of Stormer due to be released at the 900 SD celebrations. There were problems, however – the first 704 “Kelpie”, it showed advanced psychoses, flying into terrible rages at sudden moments due to ‘stunted learning capacity’ in its mental design. The Kelpie could only resolve its confusion through acts of barbarism. Originally devised as an experiment to provide enhanced aggression, it installed with complex fighting capabilities which exceeded that of the standard 313. The problem was that Karma hadn't increased the prototype's base holographic memory to contain the new skills. The result was a cruel and monstrous sadist. Phantom Pregnancy dropped the project and began a new scheme which later became the 714 Chagrin, a Stormer variant marginally stronger than the Kelpie model but lacking the astonishing combat skills that had driven the 704 so insane.

Today, Chuerrin, the one and only 704, makes its terrible name in the Circuit. The Contract Refs and Security want it banned permanently due the large numbers of both Killers and Circuit staff that it murders. There seems to be no method of restraining its violent urges. Certain Necanthropes have even mentioned suspicions about Chuerrin's true nature, and how they believe there is more to this primitive brute than meets the eye. They



hint that there is something far darker inside Chuerrin than they dare mention to the media. They say there is an image they see in his eyes that is not normal for a Stormer, not normal at all.

After all is said and done, one thing keeps Chuerrin on the vid screens, despite his excesses. The audience love him. The public always has a fascination for the bad guys, and Chuerrin is a prime candidate for the Circuit's arch-villain.

"Step in the ring, come on, I dare ya... come on, I promise I'm not gonna kill you... I'm just gonna twist your fuckin' spine round your ears! Ha ha h... hey come back! I'll kill you... raaargh!"

SLANDER – (HUMAN, REP 9)

The history of this shady Contract Killer is almost as bizarre as his niche in the Circuit. Initially, Slander started out as a Forensics Operative in an Investigation Squad. The first three months were fairly successful as the squad completed various White and Grey BPNs, disbanding Soft Companies and destroying serial Killers. Their mistake lay in becoming over-confident; the squad took on a black BPN with high media coverage.

The result was disastrous. Their objective – a vicious Cognate from Cannibal Sector Three known as “Mind Tarot” – wiped out the squad in less than an hour. The only survivor was their Forensics Operative and acting medic. The media laughed about their performance and about how the only character who “kicked

butt” was the doctor. The defunct squad became the laughing stock of Mort, and its sole survivor, mentally scarred by both the event and the subsequent negative attention, decided his days as a medical Operative were over. He returned to training under the new name of Slander.

When Slander re-emerged, he was a Contract Killer armed with a custom Power Reaper and an insane outlook. Despite his new position as a media sensation, Slander is still bitter about all the embarrassment Third Eye caused him as an Op. These days, Slander gets revenge by disgusting the news reporters. He performs the most revolting acts of brutality, and then politely explains the horrible pathological details of his work. Few media teams can stomach his horrible "Forensics Reports", but because Slander has become such a successful and politely psychotic Contract Killer, the press is in no position to complain. Third Eye controllers know how much Slander enjoys revolting the press, and keep him compliant by sending young, inexperienced teams to film him.

Slander has recently won himself a broadcasting slot after Gorezones, explaining how the various competitors died in the messiest, most graphic detail possible. This watershed programme is very popular with the more jaded audiences. Needless to say, Slander is doing considerably better than during his unfortunate time as an Operative. Despite his twisted intentions, "An In-depth Look" is a medically accurate show, with something to be learned from every episode.

“Well, we have got a bit of a sticky mess here, haven’t we chaps? Now, as you can see, the Power Reaper – at point blank range – is a trifle extreme in terms of tissue damage, but if you... no, come here... if you pull back the fragmented bone you can... oh dear, that is a lot of vomit. Mmm, interesting. I suggest you try to vary your diet somewhat. Pizza is all well and good, but not as a sole source of nutrition. Anyway, what’s the matter, haven’t you seen brain tissue mashed into the lungs by Automatic fire before?”





MAGS – (HUMAN, REP 7)

Billed as the 'girl next door made good' of the Contract Circuit, Mags has a small but growing following of fans who like their women intelligent and mechanically competent. Like many other top-flight female Killers (and unlike the great majority of unsuccessful ones), she is neither dumb and busty nor a raving psychotic, and as such she is popular with the media interviewers.

Mags and her 'tank' ANDI (Automated Navigation and Driving Interface) typically get involved in fights that make allowance heavy weaponry and artillery. Her preferred opponents are subversives, such as Thresher and similar heavy armour Soft Company opponents. Her recent rise into the public eye came after her single-person assault on a DarkNight weapons bunker made several primetime slots. She is always guaranteed to put on a good show, with lots of flashes and bangs and – on a good day – flying chunks of heavy armour.

The ANDI is a vital part of her arsenal. A truly customized personal transport based on a chopped down Battle Taxi, it is one of a kind. It has been known to keep pace with a Pandora trike over good terrain, and routinely withstands 17mm DU fire from Thresher weapons units – with a minor little patching. The real innovation however is the remote handling capability which allows Mags to give the tank simple commands even when she is out and about on the battlefield. It is fitted out with a Reaper cannon that can be remotely targeted and fired too, which comes in useful.

Even out of the APC Mags is a frightening opponent, as the girl next door becomes a serious and focused Killer. Precision moves with her customized MAL assault cannon and her use of well placed explosives mean that her combats, while perhaps shorter than most, are very photogenic. The sight of a slight, 5ft 4" girl in shock armour ripping apart a power suit is very popular – and makes a very good advert for MAL. After all, if some one that petite can be so devastating using their products, just imagine what a pumped-up Frother could manage...

In fact, despite her public image Mags is very sharp-minded. Her contracts and sponsorships are carefully worded and kept water tight. Her fights are carefully planned out, and where possible she prefers to prepare the terrain in advance, with explosive charges and similar traps – particularly when taking on Hunter Sheets. In short, very little in Mags' life is left to chance.

"I'm a delicate little flower? Oh, that's sweet! Terribly misguided of course, but still very sweet. Unfortunately, <click-click> sweet just doesn't cut it with Mr Slayer, and I've got a job to do... <BOOM!>"

TACHI THE REAVER – (FROTHER, REP 10)

One of SLA Industries' most popular Contract Killers, this year Tachi the Reaver celebrates his 15th season on the Circuit.



Despite having been a successful Contract Killer for all this time, Tachi has yet to achieve his lifelong goal – to hunt down and kill his arch-enemy, Faraegio DownFaller, his brother. Tachi's last surviving relative is now one of DarkNight's toughest ex-War Criminals.

Like Slander, Tachi started working for SLA Industries as an Op. He and his brother were a two man Death Squad from the Industrial World Xaime. The Zanetti Brothers loved the thrill of the hunt and would go to great lengths to chase criminals, sometimes following bounties across the World of Progress under the aegis of Hunter Sheets and Green BPNs.

The Zanetti Brothers' union came to an end when Tachi and Faraegio followed Grin Sin, a crafty DarkNight Espionage Agent, to the War World Dante after a daring chase through many Natural Worlds. On arrival, the brothers split up and headed out across the War World in search of Grin Sin, trying to avoid current combat zones.

Tachi's journey was long and harsh, but he finally relocated his brother. During a ghastly firefight against Thresher in one of their chemical plants, Tachi found his brother and learnt a horrible truth. Faraegio was here to kill not only Thresher, but Tachi as well.

It turned out that Faraegio had caught up with Grin Sin, but had been subverted, and was now fully dedicated to the DarkNight cause. His first mission was to annihilate the chemical plant and bury Tachi in the ruins. Faraegio thought he'd killed Tachi in the destruction of the Thresher installation, but Tachi managed to survive. When the medi-vac arrived, he was slapped into a life support and shipped back to Mort.

Tachi woke up in a terrible rage, and despite the hospital's insistence that he stay in treatment – he was still wearing most of his life support equipment when he stormed out – he left to join the Contract Circuit so that The World of Progress could really see how loyal he was. Tachi the Reaver was an instant success. The audience loved this raging brute with weird pulsing tubes that sprouted from his head and neck, and the image was so successful that once healed, he decided to keep the supports as his trademark. Tachi hates DarkNight and will take any contract or BPN that gives him a chance to work against them. He will also do free hits in return for info that brings him closer to the DownFaller.

"The money? The fame? Yeah, I suppose they're alright, but that's not why I'm here. I am looking for a traitor and my hatred keeps me alive on the Circuit. One day... one day I will find him and until that day comes... I will not be defeated!"

BUSHMASTER – (XENO, REP 8)

Like Top Notch, BushMaster is very fond of The Hunt. He prefers to fight his opponents on a more bestial level, however. BushMaster dislikes guns and never uses them in a match, which earns him respect in the Circuit. He is viewed as a true competitor that both the audience and Third Eye can rely on provide action and artistic prowess.

BushMaster started in the Circuit as a Contract Hunter, travelling the Natural Worlds that span The World of Progress in search of



new 'souvenirs'. This career proved to be short-lived, as the rush of the kill became too much for him. He returned to Mort to fight rather than to catch. Despite having given up on the profession, BushMaster still likes to compete against Hunters' prizes.

Although BushMaster is merciless towards his opponents, he respects the animal instincts of his challengers and their will to survive. He will always work on a straight, fast kill, trying not to wound the animal or put it through any unnecessary pain during its final moments. BushMaster has been so inspired by nature that he has had Karma reconstruct his body to some extent, to emphasise the ways of an animal. They have succeeded in converting the standard Xeno into a creature of the wild.

In many ways, BushMaster fights like a Wraith Raider, using stealth and speed as his weapons. His favourite setting is jungle terrain, where he can use camouflage to his full advantage. Most opponents never see BushMaster's deathblow coming – a faint rustling in a nearby shrub, the sudden flash of a spear tip or claw and it's all over.

"Listen to my voice now before you enter the foliage, for you will never hear it again, nor any other for that matter..."

TOP NOTCH – (HUMAN, REP 9)

A gun-woman with a superb eye for sniping, Top Notch has caused a lot of controversy on the Circuit. Long-range attacks always do. The media think Sniping Rifles ruin the feel of a fight and the thrill of confrontation. The public don't agree, however –

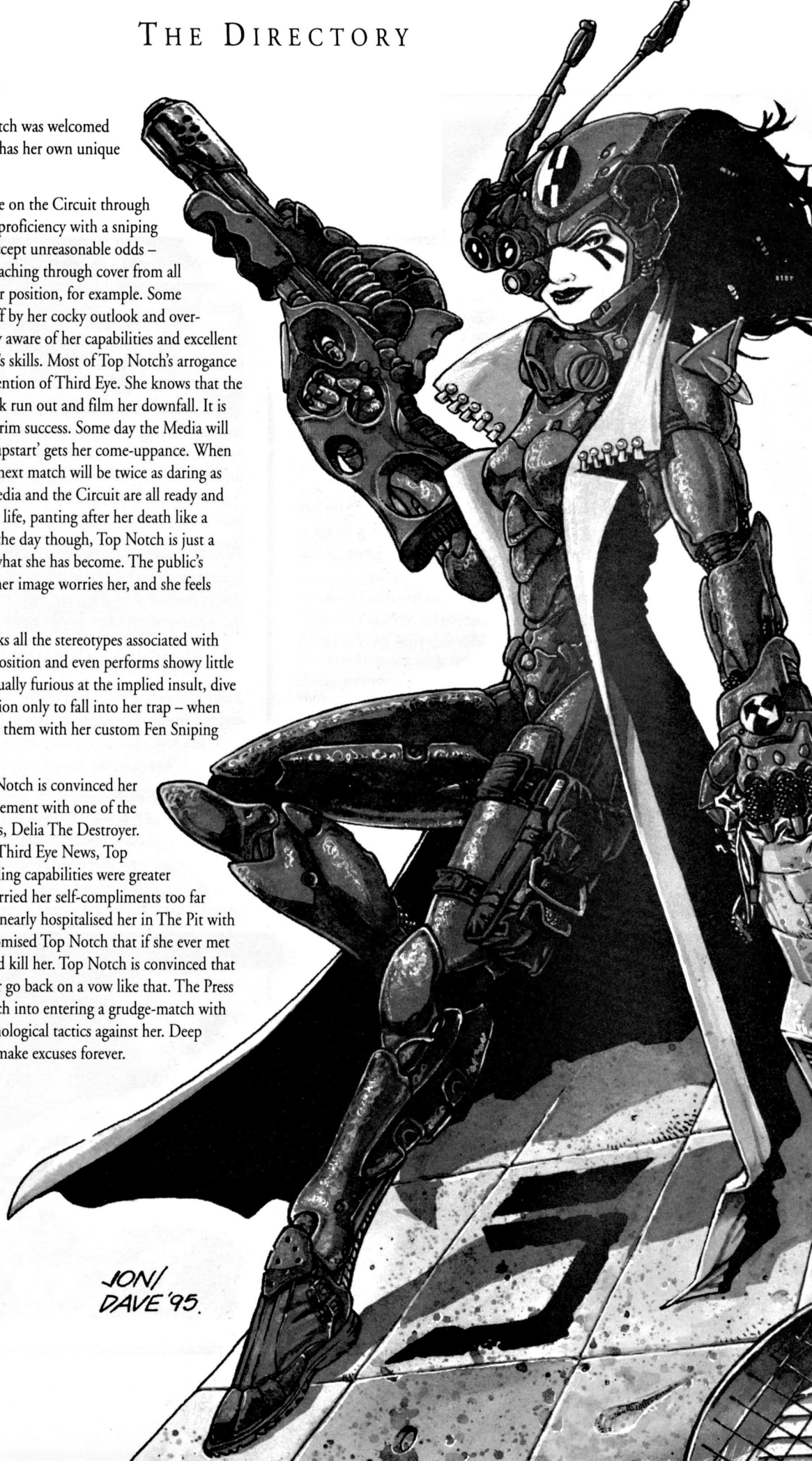
THE DIRECTORY

the appearance of Top Notch was welcomed by the audiences, and she has her own unique space in the ratings.

Top Notch made her name on the Circuit through her boldness. Despite her proficiency with a sniping rifle, she is not afraid to accept unreasonable odds – multiple opponents approaching through cover from all vectors and all aware of her position, for example. Some Contract Killers are put off by her cocky outlook and over-confidence, but she is fully aware of her capabilities and excellent at evaluating an opponent's skills. Most of Top Notch's arrogance is put on to attract the attention of Third Eye. She knows that the media wants to see her luck run out and film her downfall. It is all part and parcel of her grim success. Some day the Media will get their shoot when the 'upstart' gets her come-uppance. When Top Notch brags that her next match will be twice as daring as the last, the public, the Media and the Circuit are all ready and eager to watch her risk her life, panting after her death like a lynch mob. At the end of the day though, Top Notch is just a normal person, scared of what she has become. The public's macabre fascination with her image worries her, and she feels trapped.

In action, Top Notch breaks all the stereotypes associated with Snipers. She displays her position and even performs showy little routines. Her attackers, usually furious at the implied insult, dive forward to storm her position only to fall into her trap – when they break cover, she plugs them with her custom Fen Sniping Rifle.

Despite her attitude, Top Notch is convinced her fate is sealed after a disagreement with one of the Circuit's resident superstars, Delia The Destroyer. During an interview with Third Eye News, Top Notch boasted that her killing capabilities were greater than Delia's. Top Notch carried her self-compliments too far and later that night, Delia nearly hospitalised her in The Pit with a broken chair-leg. She promised Top Notch that if she ever met her in the Arena, she would kill her. Top Notch is convinced that she will. Delia would never go back on a vow like that. The Press continue to goad Top Notch into entering a grudge-match with Delia, using her own psychological tactics against her. Deep down she knows she can't make excuses forever.



"Hey, I can take anybody, just wait till the next Hunt and you'll see SLA training at it's finest. What? Yeah, sure I'm going for 'The Big One' against Delia, my financiers just haven't got a date set yet..."

MR. CONSEQUENCE – (EBON, REP 8)

This shadowy Ebon is one of the most mysterious and feared Contract Killers on the Circuit, yet unusually, most of his successes are through default. Mr. Consequence has the uncanny ability to terrorise his opponents to such an extent that they dare not step into the ring to face him in fear of the terrible fate they'll earn.

Much of Mr. Consequence's stigma comes from his first bloody contests on the Circuit. At first he was regarded as a typical Ebon (if a little arrogant and a bit above his social station) who strutted about the arenas like he owned them, refusing to respect Killers with higher Rep. Many viewed this with distaste, disliking his lack of respect for the codes and ethics of the Circuit. Finally, things came to a head. The established Killers could bear no more of this arrogant poseur who did little more than talk about his "greatness." To teach him a lesson, the Killers sent The Brawler to deal with the young lout – a truly humongous Shaktar, once part of Lord Shahanti's Honour Guard, with four years spent in battles against Thresher on Cross.

The Brawler calmly warned Mr. Consequence to toe the line and respect those greater than himself. Mr. Consequence told The Brawler to get stuffed, and the old Shaktar quickly lost his patience and ordered the Ebon to get in the ring and take what was coming to him. Mr. Consequence looked The Brawler in the eye and threatened that if he pressed the challenge, he would die the most horrible death ever, worse than all the nightmares of Cross, more terrible than gross dishonour.

The Brawler didn't know whether to laugh or to feel pity for the young fool and stepped proudly into the ring, ready to take Mr.

Consequence down a few pegs. The Ebon gave The Brawler one last smile before he entered the ring, and then let his face go blank. What ensued was like a fast, brutal dance as the flitting Ebon leapt around the lumbering monster, slicing him apart as though he were a helpless blind man. What really terrified the Contract Killers were the pitiful screams of the dying Shaktar, so undeserving of such a terrible fate. It were as though The Brawler saw something more than arrogance and delight behind the Ebon's eyes.

To this day, Mr. Consequence has been avoided by hundreds of Contract Killers who dare not face the fate of those who have gone before. Even Killers who have thrown down the gauntlet against him have submitted to him at the last minute, just before entering the ring. It is whispered that such opponents are plagued by nightmares of their impending doom and harassed by strange, unfortunate coincidences that get steadily worse as the match approaches. Mr. Consequence remains a truly forbidding individual.

"Killing you will be an exquisite delight, delicious to spray your ignorant blood across the horrified spectators. Even their fear will pale in the face of your impending nightmare. Death will seem like a luxury when I have finished with you, my frail friend."

PREACHER – (WRAITH RAIDER, REP 8)

Many members of the public believe that loyalty for Mr Slayer and the World of Progress can only truly be found amongst the ranks of Cloak Division's Dark Finders. This is not the opinion of the manic Wraith Raider known as Preacher.

This enigmatic wraith contradicts many of the usual assumptions of the World of Progress. He dresses like a Dark Finder, yet he is not one. His physical build is unlike that of a normal Wraith Raider – it is a great deal more muscular, resembling that of a human – yet Preacher has no desire to be human or, for that matter, a Dark Finder. He simply wants to emphasise the





reliability, versatility and strength of his race to his idol, Mr Slayer.

On the Circuit, Preacher dresses to resemble a tall, ice-white Dark Finder. Armed with a custom Flick Scythe, he spreads the word of his people to Third Eye, the eyes and ears of Mort. Preacher is widely supported on his Home Worlds (even although he is a little eccentric) and many view him as a 'missionary' for his race thanks to his success in the Circuit.

Preacher only ever challenges subversive Contract Killers; he thinks that confrontation between two SLA Killers is bad for public morale. He will happily join up with other SLA Contract Killers for a Team event, as long the group's efforts are against subversive opponents – like Mr. Midnight. Preacher has a long standing animosity for the grim DarkNight Killer. Mr. Midnight's hatred of Wraith Raiders is widely known. Two of Preacher's brood were killed by Mr. Midnight during a tag-team match. The rules of the match were first to Knock-Out, but Mr. Midnight wanted to go much, much further. Ignoring the deafening roars of an outraged audience, Mr. Midnight slaughtered the two unarmed Wraith Raider brothers with a concealed Vibro Sabre while his partner, The Jitter Man, screeched with laughter by the side of the ring.

Preacher has sworn to kill Mr. Midnight in the Arena anytime the cruel subversive is willing to confront him, but as far as anybody can tell, Mr. Midnight will never accept the challenge. He knows he is hurting the vengeful Wraith Raider far more by ignoring him.

"All you people watching, I say to you do not turn to subversion, or we will cut you down without pity or remorse. You can only find shelter under the shadow of Mr Slayer, and the frightened eyes of our enemies will shine vulnerable in the dark."

TIG – (FROTHER, REP 5)

Tig is one of the newest Contract Killers to join the Circuit, and has gained immediate fame and popularity. A lot of her media coverage is due to the fame of her older sister, Ultra Violet, who helped tutor her during her training for the Arena. Tig is young and impetuous, with the bad habit of offending older members of the Circuit. A lot of her immaturity is due to her lack of experience, and to some extent she was thrown in at the deep end when she became a Contract Killer. She doesn't really mean anything by her headstrong manner – she is a good-natured girl who sometimes has difficulty coming to terms with her run of good luck. Tig loves her sister dearly, but is getting fed up of living under the shadow of a media icon. In nearly every interview she gives, she is introduced as "Ultra Violet's sister", and she feels she should receive the credit she's due as a Contract Killer in her own right rather than as a famous person's cute little sister.

Being slighted like this makes Tig feel that she must prove herself if she is ever to become a powerful member of the Circuit.

Unfortunately, she takes too much from Top Notch's book, and challenges opponents way above her station. This is when Ultra Violet has to step in and apologise to the disgruntled Contract Killers who have been offensively challenged by what they see as an impertinent upstart. Ultra Violet has managed to pull Tig out of several certain deaths so far, much to the annoyance of Tig herself, who is confident that she could have "taken them". No-one so far really minds – they all remember the frustration involved in climbing the ranks, and they are prepared to drop the matter.

Except for one Killer, that is. Chuerrin has not forgotten Tig's aggravating threats, and being asexual, it is not swayed by her good looks. Chuerrin is wryly amused by Tig's boldness, but thinks she's stupid and weak. Despite her big sister, it plans to take up her challenge some day when it is mind-numbingly bored. If it weren't for the inevitable – and, in all likelihood, lethal – reaction from Ultra Violet, it would have killed Tig months ago.

In combat, Tig's skills are excellent. She is fast and deadly, using her size and dexterity to supreme advantage. She is a completely different person when fighting, showing no signs of immaturity or silliness when her life is at stake. She becomes very professional when it actually matters most. In a few years, Tig will be much better than her older sister. Ultra Violet just wants to make sure she lives long enough to see it.

"Wow, that fight was great fun! You get such a total buzz when a blade or a bullet zips past your ear and you're just flying at them. Everything just goes red! Um... well, those guys were good, yeah... but, I guess I made it, huh?"



ULTRA VIOLET – (FROTHER, REP 9)

Ultra Violet lives her life on the brink of disaster, but somehow manages to keep pulling through thanks to a surprising combination of stability and common sense. She was one of the first fighters in the new wave of spectacular, high prestige Contract Killers, and when she arrived on the Circuit, the regulars were slightly taken aback by her vibrant costume and extrovert nature.

She was fast and deadly in combat, combining acrobatic style with unerring precision. Since the arrival of the new armour types in the 900SD celebrations, Ultra Violet has improved her unique style with the aid of a suit of SilverBack, making her swifter, more awesome, and all together more entertaining. Even though Ultra Violet has upgraded her armour, she is never likely to change her trademark, two twin custom Buzzsaws. Ultra Violet made her name using these grizzly partners, never scrimping on the ammunition. They are fitted with snail-drums, and she never seems to take her fingers off the triggers. Thousands tune into the Circuit to watch Ultra Violet massacre her opponents in a flurry of bullets, spent cases pouring endlessly from the Buzzsaws as she sails through the air like a psychotic ballerina. When Ultra Violet leaves the match, the bodies and spent ammo lie in heaps of equal devastation.

Outside her violent work in the Circuit, Ultra Violet tries to live a normal life and not let her main sponsor – Ultra Violence – change her into the monster she is perceived as in the Arena. She is desperate to maintain her sanity because it seems that her family and friends are falling apart around her. Tig, her sister, is a wild, immature girl who can't stay out of trouble. Her boyfriend, Hael Mauri is nearly suicidal, and seriously addicted to a variety of Karma drugs. Ultra Violet feels personally responsible for both of them, and tries her best to look after them. The only person she consults about her problems is Hael Mauri's occasional partner, Brazil, a large 313 Stormer from the Circuit. Together, they try to prevent Tig and Hael Mauri from going over the edge.

Ultra Violet's parents were Frothers who had plans to make their two young daughters respected members of their Clan, but when the mother and father died on a black BPN, a confrontation with the Bassisto, a deadly serial Killer from Newtown, their children were taken into care (aged 10 and 7), and their identity in the Frother Clans was lost for good. Even at such a young age, Ultra Violet was left to look after her little sister. She has had to grow up very quickly, and since those early years Ultra Violet has tried to remain strong and self reliant, if a little over protective of her friends, especially Tig.

"Does anyone have any idea how many rounds I fired off? I kinda lost it after the first 100... yeah, it was quite a steep body count wasn't it, still, it's all part of the show. Yeah, I'm going home. Bye."



BRAZIL – (STORMER, REP 7)

Despite this being a time that welcomes new concepts, Brazil – a Contract Killer from the traditional mould – stays popular on the Circuit. He doesn't wear flashy costumes, avoids getting into the loud, public threat wars that the viewers love so much, and avoids the more gimmicky fights. Brazil is a true professional through and through. He was a rarity during the days when he worked as a regular Operative for SLA Industries, one of the few Ops brave enough to patrol the horrific Cannibal Sectors as a full time job. Even today, Operatives working for SLA Industries who know the ruins as well as Brazil does are scarce to say the least. Despite his fortune, he still resides in Cannibal Sector Four, where he marks his territory in the depths of its sewer systems amongst the Carnivorous Pig dens. Brazil originally made his home in Cannibal Sector One, until one day a fatal run-in with Digger led him to the surgeries of LAD, and his present situation. Brazil is not vengeful about his previous demise as he knows how old and deadly the manchine is, and that he could never win. Brazil respects the colourful inhabitants of the Cannibal Sectors and the territories they control. As long as they leave his home in the sewers alone – and they do – he will not trouble them.

These days, Brazil spends much of his time in the Downtown Circuit, where he pits his strength against the seedy, subversive Contract Killers that infest the place. There are no frills in the Downtown arenas, and the audience is gathered eagerly in the aisles. This suits Brazil just fine, because although he has a strong position in the Circuit, he will always be a devoted employee of SLA, determined to destroy all rivalry. To Brazil, the money,



sponsors and television coverage means nothing; he's interested in the opportunity to kill Mort's grimmest subversives.

Maybe someday Brazil will return to the ruins as a Cannibal Sector Operative, or perhaps as Corporate Militia on Dante, where his talents are well suited. He still occasionally teams up with his old friend Hael Mauri, to help the Frother on particularly tricky BPNs.

Brazil is close friends with Taarnish, the first 313 Stormer. The old warrior appreciates his 'young' friend's loyalty to the SLA code in a time when personal agendas are weakening the company structure. Every so often, Brazil journeys to Uptown to visit Ultra Violet and her boyfriend. Brazil understands Hael's pain – he too has undergone the LAD process.

"The money means nothing. I'm here to do a job, just like any Operative on the street. I'm here to protect SLA and the public. If you've got a problem with that, meet me in the ring, and we'll talk...."

SCREECH – (VEVAPHON, REP 7)

The arrival of Vevaphons onto the Contract Circuit was greeted with a mixed response. A great deal of the contestants won't fight them in the arenas at all, for their ways of battle are sly and cunning, capricious and confusing as they close for their inhuman kills.

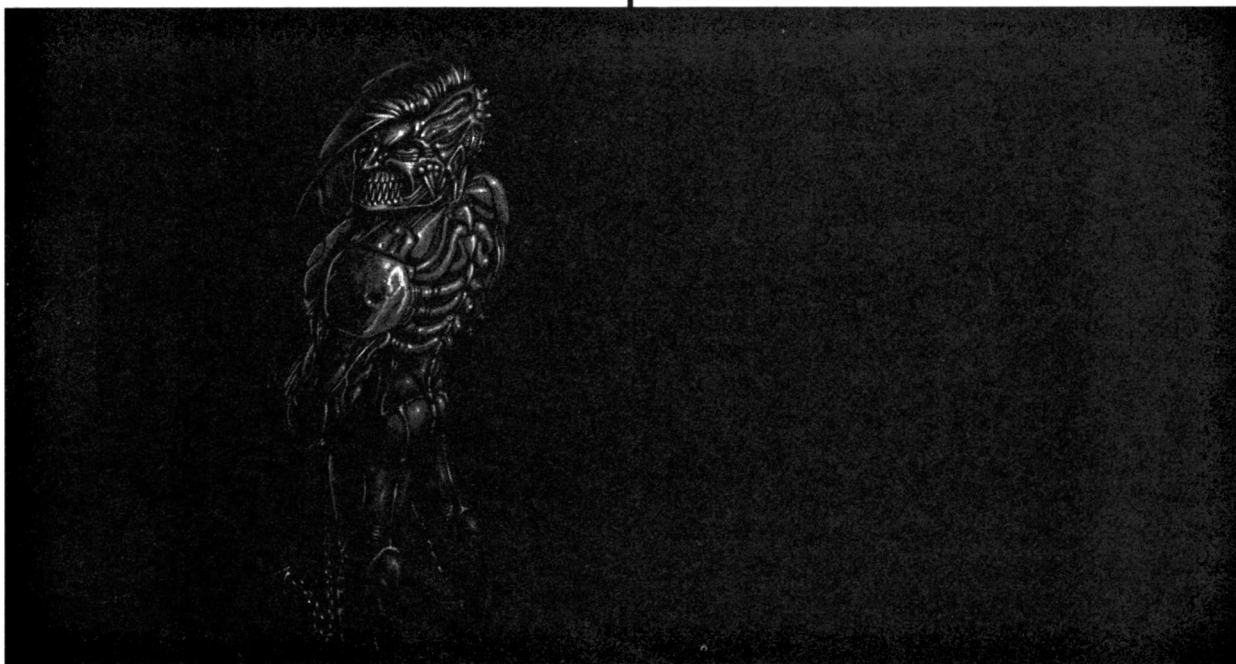
Screech takes a great delight in people's dislike of it. It is a particularly disturbing Vevaphon that shuns emotional responses and physical conformities to phase its opponents. Its outlook is almost alien. Screech shuns gender, form and sanity. Its shape is one of a kind, a bizarre image that resembles a mutated scream – a call of death to its opponents.

During its development, this Vevaphon was the victim of several chemical mistakes. The result was an insane creature that relished the fear it provoked. Screech is a monster to behold, twisting and contorting its body into ugly, disturbing shapes. The only feature on its head that remains consistent is a grinning mouth, a horrible array of razor sharp fangs. The rest of its body tends to be tall and contorted, twisting into razor-sharp grooves and angling the contours of its nightmarish body. There is rarely a blunt patch on the whole of its hide. Screech never uses firearms, and only enters close quarter contests, where it can disgust and frighten its worried opponent. Despite its cunning intelligence however, Screech is a mute. It cannot speak other than through incomprehensible screams and howls.

Outside of combats, Screech is avoided by everyone and everything. There are more complaints from the audience about Screech than about anybody else because of its behaviour on the arena. A great number of people are disgusted by the way this monster howls as it tears its opponent to shreds. Concerned parents have written to the Contract Circuit to complain about the nightmares Screech has given their frightened children on a startlingly regular basis. This what Screech wants, and its putrid fame rises amongst those frightened and fascinated by such a macabre demon from Karma's darkest corner.

Screech's motives and lifestyle are a puzzle. It is a creature shrouded in unpleasant mystery. Some say that after a fight or victory in the Arena, it lopes off disturbingly to the Cannibal Sectors, to scream and howl among the vicious Domino Dogs and baying Carriens. Maybe this is where Screech feels at home, amongst animals, with other creatures that know only the thrill of murder.

"SCCCCREEEEEAAAAARRRRRRGGGGGGHHHHHH!!!"



THE BOND – (SHAKTAR, REP 9)

Shaktars do not often enter the Contract Circuit because of its flagrant abuse of honour. Although they appreciate the aspect of challenge, they despise the excessive media coverage and the dishonourable attitudes of the Refs, Corporates and Killers. Despite complaints from some of his race, The Bond has dedicated himself to fighting on the Circuit. The Bond has focussed his career in the arenas to the destruction of those benefiting from the injustices in the Circuit. He is particularly outraged by the misfits of his own race – the Shaktars from the Eighth Moon.

Lord Shahanti permits The Bond to partake in the contests because it is right that one should represent their species in a sport dedicated to fighting, and because The Bond's motives are pure – to cleanse the Circuit of the Eighth Moon infection. The sword that he has given the Bond is a mighty weapon indeed. The Bond has the pardon of the seven gods, provided that he follows certain strictures. The stipulations are that he may not profit financially from his actions and he must not carry sponsors' symbols on his person. If The Bond needs money to survive, he must complete Hunter Sheets in addition to his work on the Circuit. When The Bond completes his goal, and the Eighth Moon Contract Killers are destroyed, he will be required to return to his home on Kn'nth and begin his career again from scratch. None of his previous efforts will be accounted for until he has achieved the position of warrior on his home world. Life is pretty tough for The Bond, but his patience and loyalty are legendary.

The peak of The Bond's career will be to defeat the loathsome DarkNight Shaktar known as The Frown. Once he is dead, The Bond will gladly return to his home world to start anew. Many are in awe of The Bond, for his skills and appearance are magnificent. He fits the ideal role of a proud and honourable Shaktar who will only fight balanced matches. There are those who maintain that The Bond has no place on the Circuit, however. These protesters are generally bookies and sponsors who can neither bribe nor profit from him like they can with countless other Contract Killers. The Bond is far too honourable to take part in any cheating or foul play, or to even let it go unreported.

To see The Bond is to look upon a warrior, a noble knight of the Shaktar worlds. He is tall, but not excessively built like The Frown. The Bond has toned his body to personal perfection, and he will not step beyond his own natural limitations, even should it prove necessary to defeat his monstrous adversary from the Eighth Moon.

"The nature of my work is not widely accepted by my people but a cleansing must take place. The Circuit is plagued by a sickness from our Eighth Moon and I shall not return to our ways until he is committed to ground by my blade."



DELIA THE DESTROYER – (HUMAN, REP 10)

When Delia first started her career she was a media belle, the ultimate statement of chic in the World of Progress, and a superb Contract Killer, too. That was until Icon came along. After Delia's untimely assassination, her whole life changed. Not only was she consumed with the desire for a revenge that she couldn't have, the inevitable brain tissue deterioration involved in the process had changed her from a sociable, fun-loving human being into a wild, aggressive psychopath who could only find peace of mind through killing. Despite her brutal change in character, Delia The Destroyer is afraid. She is convinced that she is being hunted by



her Killer. He haunts her dreams, waiting in the shadows of her mind to finish the job he started outside the Pit on a rainy night in 899SD.

SLA Industries is extremely worried about Delia's strange obsession with her Killer. It has become something more than a simple act of revenge. Delia has spoken with Icon since her initial death, and their conversation spoke of a competition, a duel to the death. For all Delia's skills in the art of killing, she is convinced that Icon will murder her forever this time. Delia has already experienced death once, and she is terrified of feeling its cold embrace a second time.

SLA psychologists have studied Delia's case and have come up with the theory that Delia is in conflict with her own fate, represented by Icon himself. The strange figure certainly has a mental hold on Delia – he apparently knows how she thinks, he knows to get inside her head and drive her mad with fear. What the doctors don't understand is how such a young person could have developed such a strong understanding of someone so different. The signs point toward Necanthrope activity, but none of the investigators from Dark Lament found any trace of Ebb at the scene of Delia's original death. They found something abnormal beside Delia's body, but Stigmartyr immediately stepped in and closed the whole case before anything could be discovered or recorded. It could be that those who have researched Delia's assassination know that the little Icon is not what he seems....

The ongoing battle with Icon has definitely affected Delia's performance in the Circuit, although her new-found savagery has, in the short term, been beneficial in the Arena. Stigmartyr agents attend every match she partakes in, which makes everyone who

knows about them immensely nervous. They are never revealed to the public, of course. It is as though the shadowy agency knows of Delia's desire for an explanation to put her mind at rest and are there to make sure she doesn't get too close.

Delia refuses to die before she has confronted her murderer for the last time. She knows it will come soon; Icon is stalking her, killing her friends and playing games with her everyday life. She looks forward to the time when the pain will end.

"Come to me, Icon. Let's finish this dance together. Since you killed me, you ruined everything I ever had. The pain never leaves me, and when all is said and done, it's all I'll ever know. Icon, please."

JOHNNY AUTOMATIC – (HUMAN, REP 10)

Old, weather-beaten and relentless, Johnny Automatic walks the Circuit like an armoured hermit, looking for the bullet with his name on it, the end long overdue. Few know Johnny Automatic's true age, but his ancient armour and equally arcane weapons are a symbol of his years of experience. Johnny's equipment – dating back to the early wars on Dante – is barely concealed by the ragged cloth of his once-cherished ceremonial battle dress.

Tired and relentless, Johnny Automatic is a man-legend waiting longingly for the time when an opponent of equal skill will take him down. Unfortunately, there are very few with the talent. Johnny Automatic is superbly skilled, and even those who exceed his talents have fallen to his lethal mastery of tactics. He has an uncanny ability to evaluate his opponents' moves far, far faster than any other Contract Killer working for SLA Industries, or indeed anyone else for that matter. Johnny has asked to confront Halloween Jack on numerous occasions, but SLA has denied him the privilege every time.

Johnny changes his fighting style every few matches, to make sure that would-be opponents can't learn his moves. He wants to be beaten, but he has no intention of making it easy. Most of his combat experience is from Dante, where he went when he tired of the changeless life on Mort. He was young and impatient, but grew up fast when he was faced with the eternal chaos of war on the horrible planet. Here, he learned the true need for heroes in the World of Progress, and for a long, harsh decade Johnny Automatic fought his way through the war-torn landscape in search of the most dangerous subversives. After ten dreadful years, he returned to Mort to claim his position as a Contract Killer in the Circuit, receiving vast fame almost overnight.

All Johnny Automatic wants is to prove his worth and loyalty to SLA, and to find an opponent to better him. He won't fight the Spinner however, because he considers the wily old Necanthrope's centuries of experience to be an unworthy advantage. Johnny is an honourable fighter, and one who will not take life unnecessarily.

Despite the cruel hardships of Dante, Johnny Automatic did not really go mad. This was due to the unit of Shaktars with whom he



fought for the length of his unpleasant stay. The Shaktars taught Johnny the values of honour and courage, and through their wisdom and strength, he stayed sane. The only thing he didn't get over was the death of his friends, who were ambushed by a Thresher Death Squad a mere week after his discharge from the Dante Militia. Johnny suffered a mental breakdown, going catatonic for nearly six months when he got the news. He was finally cured through the consolations of the Lord Shahanti, who immediately went to Johnny's side when informed of the situation. Shahanti brought him back through a process of healing rituals, and in return, Johnny Automatic considers himself forever in debt to Shahanti.

"Get these cameras out of my face, please. Thank you. Yes, she fought well, and the next time she will be better. She'd better be. Yes, of course I'd fight her again. I'll fight anyone with the courage to challenge me."

SOUR BLOOD – (DARK FINDER, REP 8)

Sour Blood is a Contract Killer who lives up to his name. If he were to die in the arenas of the Circuit, he would not be missed. He's a selfish, arrogant thug who only gets ahead in life by flexing his Nuke Tendon muscles. Like so many in the Circuit, Sour Blood gets a kick out of being a bully. He is lazy and spoilt, and usually scares lesser employees into doing his dirty work for him.

The slimy Dark Finder was dismissed from the ranks of Cloak Division years ago for peddling expensive Karma drugs to the Downtown streets. He wasn't too upset. Thanks to his excessively-built biogenetic body, it was easy for him to find a place on the Circuit. He found immediate sponsorship with a Third Eye organisation, Channel 69. This was very lucky for him, as it coincided with Channel 69 expanding onto the sleazy side of the media scene. The new company had no reservations about showing scenes of explicit violence or sex, and as far as Sour Blood was concerned, they knew they had an asset. From the day Channel 69 hired Sour Blood, they spoiled him rotten – and he was pretty rotten to start with. They draped him in lavish luxuries in return for protection and violent media coverage. For his comfortable lifestyle, Sour Blood was expected to work outside of SLA jurisdiction. This suited Sour Blood just fine. He had never been a great fan of the SLA loyalty so common with Dark Finders. Sour Blood was more than willing to do whatever Channel 69 told him – it was nothing he hadn't done before – just as long as his position in the station was secure. He didn't care who he had to backstab.

Recently, Sour Blood has become more reluctant to take chances like he did in the beginning of his sponsorship with Channel 69. He now tends to use his personal expenses to hire Operatives of low SCL – or even enterprising Shivers – to fulfil his duties for the station. Sour Blood's payment to these unfortunates is drastically low compared to the rewards he receives for completion of the job. Naturally Sour Blood feels no guilt for

using the poor Operatives, but Channel 69 are becoming uncomfortable with the situation. They make serious money from Sour Blood's criminal activity, and they fear that his laziness may attract the attention of Cloak Division, who still have a grudge against him. Sour Blood, however, is confident that there is nothing to worry about – the Operatives who he hires wouldn't dare sell him out to Cloak Division. Would they?

"Yeah, this mission took me ages, but with my superior skills I came through on top. I hate those who dare to challenge SLA, and through my unique resources I will, I mean the company will prosper. Yeah."



HASSEN ALBA – (CHAGRIN, REP 8)

If it is possible for a Stormer to be eccentric, then Hassen Alba surely fits the bill. Alba is a Chagrin from the backwater planet Ragen, a nasty hole at the far reaches of the World of Progress. On Ragen, the warring natives looked upon the monstrous Stormer as some form of warrior deity that had risen to quell the ruthless uprisings of a planet under siege from harsh subversive attack.

Like Chuerrin, Hassen Alba is the result of a Karma accident, and this huge Chagrin got more than his fair share of enhancement. When the Bloody Knives, a Ragen Soft Company, attacked a Karma base, heavy shelling caused terrible structural damage. Floors collapsed in the blast, and various Stormer tanks were

given an unnecessary "top-up", increasing the normal capabilities and size of the standard designs. When the Bloody Knives discovered that their raid had caused a malfunction in the Stormer development area, they quickly set about destroying the remaining tanks, now over-flowing with bio-tissue. They succeeded in ruining all but one Stormer tank, but that contained the future hero of Ragen, Hassen Alba, Conqueror of the Wastes.

Alba finally emerged from his ill fitting container, and set himself against his enemies – all subversives on the planet. Hassen went about killing all opposition to SLA Industries without any planning or apprehension, and thousands followed him in a holy conquest against the perpetrators of the planet's ills. After two long years of bloody slaughter, Hassen Alba completed his quest when he killed his last major rival on the planet, the Black Shamrock Agent and ex-War Criminal "Fallen Truth." It was the end of an era the liberated people of Ragen would never forget.

Hassen Alba then turned his attentions to Mort, the figurehead of the World of Progress, and the vast sea of enemies that thrived there. It was his next destination, his next quest. When Hassen reached Mort he received an odd reception, and as he tried to explain his adventures on Ragen, the cynical people of Mort thought he was mad. SLA Industries really didn't quite know what to make of this eccentric Chagrin and his tales of war and virtues. Could it really be true that this enormous, scimitar wielding maniac was a decorated war hero from the backwater planets?

Hassen found himself a new role – a champion of the Contract Circuit whose fans fill the arenas. A massive Stormer decorated with the scars of two years of battle, he is strictly a close combat Killer, swinging his huge powered scimitar at his opponents, who always seem to be the slimiest subversive Killers. Hassen Alba is the giant of the Uptown Circuit and a strong champion of SLA Industries.

"Fight me! If you dare! I have fought my way from the ravages of Ragen to bring torment on your traitorous heads!"

DEITY – (HUMAN, REP 9)

Deity is obsessed with his work. Some have compared him to a piece of machinery, for he never seems to stop. Deity will only rarely turn down a contract, which makes him very popular with bookies and corporates alike. He has no phobias and no enemies he must desperately hunt down before his mind will be at rest. Essentially, Deity is a professional, a hit-man for SLA Industries. The only things in life that are important to Deity are completing the job and getting paid.

Deity tends to avoid social circumstances and events as he doesn't want anyone to learn anything about him. He rarely speaks, only responding when spoken to or when he needs to impart information while on a mission. Even then, Deity will reduce an entire sentence down into one word if he can. He is never seen

entering or leaving the Arena, and has never been successfully followed.

Deity's nature has paid off well, and his cold, stern demeanour strikes fear into those whom his employers have hired him to hunt. It is his emotionless, inhuman responses that gives him an air of invulnerability. Deity has studied his limitations and will not accept any contract that his skills are not the equal of. Most of his regular employers appreciate this; if Deity refuses a contract, he's either too busy or he knows he's not good enough. The corporates respect this, because he's saved them money. It doesn't happen very often though, simply because Deity is so good at what he does. Deity hates imperfection and untidiness, especially in work situations. Every hit must be just right, and exactly to the employer's specifications.

Deity is trained as a professional marksman, a martial arts expert knowing a wide range of hand weapons from knives and clubs to swords and flick scythes as well as SLA Industries' range of firearms. He was born in Meny and raised by wealthy parents, both tutors in Meny's training facilities. His father taught Death Squad classes, and his mother supervised the Kick Murder package. He received the benefits of these areas of training from a very early age, giving him a lethal edge over his classmates when he finally entered formal training. Deity's parents taught him well – how to succeed in such a vicious, cut-throat environment – and he always knew he would become a Contract Killer, although he never told his fellow students of his plans. When Deity finished training, he just seemed to disappear... at the same time as a new Contract Killer arrived on the Circuit.

Deity takes little interest in hyped matches and media events, preferring to work as a loner, killing specific targets with terrifying accuracy. He does enjoy games such as the Hunt however, where there is space for planning and strategy.

Outside the Circuit, Deity has a wife and two children (who know nothing of his profession – his wife thinks he's a very fit sales analyst), a normal name (of course), and prefers to sit in on his weekends with a good book and a warm sweater. He'd never let on about his true profession.

"Alright."

QUILL – (WRAITH RAIDER, REP 6)

Quill is a Wraith Raider with many unpleasant habits. The media and the Circuit have come to know him as a loathsome cheat and a vicious sadist. He gets a kick out of these names; he loves the prospect of being a villain, and exercises his psychopathic urges whenever he can. He derives his name from his favourite toys, twin Karma quills that sprout 3.5 feet from his warped forearms. They are ugly, warped weapons, discoloured and distorted.

Karma had warned Quill that he had an allergic reaction to certain bio-genetic tissues, but this didn't stop him from going ahead with the grim surgery. As a result, his 'new-found friends'



grew long and mutated. He didn't realise that they would bring him notoriety on the Circuit, but he would have been twice as eager if he had known. He is frowned upon as a monster that tears his victims apart with the gnarled spikes that jut from his revolting arms.

On a social level, Quill is as unpopular as he is in the Arena. Other Wraiths avoid Quill like the plague, which, judging by his obscure transformation, may not be too unfair. Due to his short temper and psychotic arrogance, Quill has few friends, and those people who associate with him do so with extreme caution. He trusts no-one, and would gladly slaughter those whom he suspected of being troublesome.

Quill's allergy to synthetic material means that he cannot eat much in the way of SLA-produced food. This doesn't bother him, as he still likes to follow his instincts to a certain extent. He only eats natural substances, particularly the warm, fresh meat so popular with his carnivorous species. Although many have complained about Quill's conduct on the Circuit, taking down an opponent and eating her on the spot in front of the cameras is

one of the reasons for his success. Sympathetic fans look upon him as an animal trying to survive against the odds.

Further reason for Quill's notoriety comes from the rumours about his so-called 'contacts'. Some believe that Quill has dealings with DarkNight, who are supposed to favour him highly. None of these rumours have been spread by Quill himself, but those who have tried to investigate the suggestions have wound up dead. Cloak Division have interrogated the twisted Wraith Raider concerning his apparent subversive activities. They have found no leads to DarkNight yet, and he has let off the hook. For now. Quill does nothing to deny these accusations, at any rate. He thinks people will fear him more if his reputation carries the possibility of fiendish purpose...

"Heh heh, yes that's it, ha ha ha! Get up, you worthless sack of <Slash! Tear!> Hee ha ha! <Turns to the crowd> Awww, Shut Up! Now, as I was saying... *chomp, chew*..."

KANSA – (HUMAN, REP 7)

Despite a face of divine innocence, Kansa claims her victims in the most sickening way imaginable. Nobody is truly sure about the mental state of this pretty young Contract Killer, other than to say that she attacks with the morose originality of a Necanthrope, strikes with the savage force of a Stormer, and then turns away with the sweet smile of an Ebon in the fruit of her youth. Kansa is a sweet rose swathed in lethal thorns. If she weren't working for SLA Industries, she would undoubtedly be a mass murderer, and a feared one at that. Outside of the Circuit, she is a picture of purity and naiveté, but in the heat of combat she becomes a bloodthirsty Killer who slaughters her opponents with a schoolgirl's smile. It is as if unaware of her actions.



Nonetheless, Kansa has the SLA psychologists perplexed as to her illness. She continually pleads innocence, saying she's not really sure why she kills people in such horrible fashions, and it doesn't affect the way she leads her social life, although nervous people keep away from her. Kansa is always saddened by people's fear, because her red slaughter of the Circuit stays in the Circuit. In this respect, Kansa is a professional despite her age – a mere 16.

Kansa is one of the youngest Contract Killers on the Circuit, and is already viewed as one of the most deadly. She is an anomaly, as her age belies her knowledge. She has no preferences in opponents. Kansa will fight anyone who wishes to die spectacularly in front of the shocked viewers of Third Eye.

Kansa has a lot of sponsorship deals, with plenty more offers on the back burner. In a violent environment like the World of Progress, Kansa's grizzly skills are congratulated rather than treated. Due to the nature of her work, Kansa is always busy on the Gorezones. She has a particular fondness for killing the newly discovered mutants of Cannibal Sector Five – the wide variation holds her interest for hours. Kansa has been known to take photographs of all the strange and bizarre creatures she has killed at these events. In fact, her goal is to eventually tag along with some Contract Hunters on a safari trip. All so far have declined the pleasure, knowing Kansa's brutality in the Arena – their job is to catch prey, not have it butchered by some young lunatic. However, The LZ Club have shown an interest in Kansa's capabilities and are willing, when the opportunity arises, to take her on a trip to one of the SLA Natural worlds, along with some media coverage. Third Eye are very keen on the prospect...

"Don't try this at home, kids..."

THE SPINNER – (NECANTHROPE, REP 20)

The Old Man of the Circuit waits patiently at the top of his crooked spiral staircase for the next challenger and would-be champion to climb his creaking steps. When they find themselves face to face with his infamous Dark Lament GlyphScythe, they all hope for a swift death.

It has been centuries since The Spinner took his throne at the top of the staircase and held it against all others. He is the greatest Contract Killer of the Circuit, and if the new year's champion chooses to seek out The Spinner in the Dark Room, it is the main event all over Mort and the rest of the World of Progress.

No-one as ever beaten The Spinner – or even harmed him. He has silently swept through hundreds of Contract Killers, sending them tumbling down his stairwell, slaughtered like pigs. Very few experienced Killers would ever consider taking The Spinner's standing Champion's Challenge, preferring to default to his authority. The audience are fascinated by The Spinner, for there is much mystery and intrigue enshrouded in the old Necanthrope's stick-like frame. He is a silent Killer, his face twisted in a permanent sneer and his eager eyes sheltered by frail strands of



white hair and a wide-brimmed hat. His tool of destruction, the unique GlyphScythe, is an ancient weapon tooled from Science Friction, modified and customised in a hundred ways over the centuries, and he wields it with deadly accuracy. To look upon The Spinner is to look upon death itself.

Although The Spinner may seem fragile, he is far from a weak collection of bones. He stands about eight feet tall, moving like an elegant and sinister skeleton, twirling his scythe high above his head as slowly creeps down the spiral stairs to bring death to his challenger. When the bloody job is done, The Spinner climbs back up to his home like a spider on an old, old web. This staircase belongs to The Spinner, and he clings to it with the grim intensity of pride that only an ancient Necanthrope can muster. The Spinner fulfils his duty to Preceptor Teeth by staying for all time in The Dark Room, on the spiral staircase, upholding the name of the Ebon races at the top of the Circuit. If he ever loses to any opponent of another species, his fate will be terrible indeed. But, at present, the chances of such an outcome are vanishingly small, since The Spinner is a nightmare to behold and knows the staircase – all its cracks and loose steps – like the back of his hand, using its rickety age to his advantage.

"It was the final step for Slice, new champion of the Circuit. The vicious Stormer charged up the dark stairwell, ready to break the rigid bones of this pesky old man. Several times, his weight nearly claimed his life as the steps broke away from beneath him, yet the only thing that fell into the darkness was his confidence. This was

the guiding force that had led him to fame and success, to this, the ultimate challenge. To beat death itself..

The Spinner crept quietly down the spiral to meet Slice. The first thing that the Stormer saw was the glint of malice in the Necanthrope's eye, followed by a flash of glistening slime running along his narrow scythe. He noticed how powerful the Necanthrope looked as he pranced towards him, cavorting like a mannequin of doom. He was taller than Slice imagined, as tall as the Stormer himself.

Before Slice could even raise his weapon, he heard the distant sound of a tight chord singing in the breeze, and the curved blade smoothly took his head from his unsuspecting shoulders.

Another loose thread drifted into the dark."

COMPLEX KILLERS

MR. MIDNIGHT – (DARK FINDER, REP 8)

It has been fifteen years since Mr. Midnight, dark anti-hero of the Tynes Complex, patrolled the streets of Mort as a Dark Finder, proud and loyal before the darkness struck and Agent Rowe became a treacherous criminal. Dark Finder Rowe's downfall was unjust, yet inescapable. Rowe fell victim to a set-up because of what he'd seen during a silent raid on a drugs-based Soft Company, Blue Line Emporium.

Rowe didn't know that a group of employees from the SLA corporate sector had financial interests in the Blue Line Emporium, and it was in their best interests to quietly protect it. Unfortunately, everything had been going well until the irritating Dark Finder stuck his oar in and started messing things up. Something had to be done about the pesky loyalist, and it was easy for the crooked corporates to find out the name of the pest endangering their valuable assets. News always travels swiftly around the Corporate Sector. Rowe had been investigating the Blue Line Emporium for a while, but it was only after interrogating one of its captured subversives that he realised that SLA employees were involved. Rowe was supposedly killed in the next attack on Blue Line – when he attacked their main plant, three hired Props riddled him with 10mm and watched his body fall into the depths of the complex.

It wasn't until six months later that SLA Industries began receiving reports that a new Contract Killer from DarkNight was murdering wealthy corporates, and that Blue Line Emporium had been annihilated. The mysterious Killer resembled a Dark Finder, and was as professional as a fully trained Operative. It was Rowe, come back from the dead, but not as his former loyal self. Now he is Mr. Midnight, a bitter enemy of SLA Industries who will stop at nothing to prove as deep and painful a thorn in the side of the World of Progress as he possibly can.

DarkNight agents found his unconscious body lying in a tank of healing chemicals. He'd fallen into the drug compounds when the

props shot him from the balcony. DarkNight adopted Rowe, and patched up his shattered body as best they could. Over the years, Mr. Midnight has become one of their greatest assets.

Mr. Midnight is not altogether human any more, especially since his accident at the drug factory. His physical health is unstable, and he needs breathing apparatus similar to that Tachi wears for cosmetic purposes. When he talks – only on occasion – he rasps out his metallic hatred for SLA. Mr. Midnight is an immense figure, a towering mass of vitriol. Because of the DarkNight chemicals which course through his veins, Mr. Midnight has become tougher and stronger than any normal human – making him an opponent to avoid...

“Curse... you... Slayer...”

THE JITTER MAN – (STORMER, REP 6)

Mr. Midnight’s sneering side-kick, the Jitter Man giggles his way through a life of sadism and crime against SLA Industries. The Jitter Man has become one of the most unique Contract Killers on the Circuit due to his biogenetic make-up – a horrible blend of Karma’s finest. The Jitter Man considers Stormers to be his worst enemies, because he has been given the worst of all of them. He is a mutant, an outcast from SLA’s biogenetic laboratories. This makes him a fitting partner for Mr. Midnight, since they have both been shunned by SLA Industries. Unlike his partner however, the Jitter Man never had any loyalty for his creators.

Despite allegations of dangerous Karma experiments, the Jitter Man is a genuine mistake. During the programming stage of his development, his DNA was polluted with fragments from across the entire range of Phantom Pregnancy designs. The result was a robust but short and ugly Stormer that crawled coughing from its process chamber. The frame was like that of a 330 Gator, but housed a keen intellect and a violent nature.



The Jitter Man was uncontrollable in labs. He had an inherent tendency to cause destruction, and the difficulties of examining him cost Karma the lives of several good technicians. In fact, the Jitter Man was so vicious that they had to release him into the Cannibal Sectors before they could finish the examination and tests. They didn’t want to just exterminate the Jitter Man, because the chances of such a random infusion proving viable again were virtually nil. The Jitter Man was simply too valuable to kill. Karma will recapture the Jitter Man again when the controversy dies down, and then his giggling days will be over.

The Jitter Man spent a long time in Cannibal Sector Four, bullying the weaker species and instilling fear in those who would try to kill and eat him while he slept. He tired quickly of the primitives, and decided to search for more valuable ways of earning respect. He finally came to the Downtown Circuit and entered the Tynes Complex as a fresh contender. This was where he found his new partner and ally, Mr. Midnight – their first matches were against each other.

Their partnership was the result of a brutal and bloody fight which left them both battered and broken, soaked in their own blood, too skilled to beat each other, too bitter to distract their attentions from the real enemy, SLA Industries. Now, the two outcasts work as one foul and merciless entity, a force to be reckoned with.

“Heeheehee haha! Dying time! Messy! Messy! Hee ha haha!”

SNAKE EYES – (ADVANCED CARRIEN, REP 8)

By the year 899SD, the Downtown Circuit thought it had seen all there was to see. In 900SD, they realised how wrong they had been when a new and unexpected fighter entered onto the scene. Snake Eyes defied all that was known about the Carrien Species. He could talk Killan intelligibly and walk with the posture of a strong human, yet he retained the cunning and ferocity of his brethren, and their unsavoury appetite for warm, raw flesh stripped from the Operative bone.

Despite Snake Eyes’ expanded intellect, he is by no means pleasant. He dislikes other races, and is aggravated by the way that they react to his species. This isolated feeling of oppression within a wealthy society makes him a terrifying and bloodthirsty opponent, especially if the foolish adversary declares a grudge against his kind. Snake Eyes has killed and eaten many loud mouthed Brain Wasters who chose to mock his species and now, as 904SD draws to a close, he stands a step above, both in talent and cunning. However, the fiendish Carrien will not settle for killing; Snake Eyes has other, more intricate agendas.

Snake Eyes wishes to use his rare intellect constructively. The first Advanced Carrien known to Mort society – although not the only one; his kind are starting to trickle into legitimate employment with SLA Industries – he feels the need to prove his wide potential at strategy, understanding and compromise. At the

moment, Snake Eyes needs to make his name and skills known to the World of Progress, although this is a troublesome time for him. As his fame grows, so do the reputations of his opponents, who get progressively tougher each time. Nonetheless, Snake Eyes is a survivor yet to be defeated.

For the first few months on The Downtown Circuit, the Killers and spectators alike held him in awe. It was the closest any of them had ever got to a live Carrien without it trying to kill and eat them within an instant. Snake Eyes was a wonder. People were transfixed by his gravelly voice – it was the first time anyone had ever heard a Carrien actually speak. After a while, Snake Eyes got angry at their curiosity, feeling that they looked upon him like some specimen or freak.

As yet, only one person has actually made contact with Snake Eyes on a social level. Tig has found a new friend, but she will pass no comment on what he thinks or says to her. It is believed that Snake Eyes has a certain level of affection for Tig that he has never shown for anyone else, as if his 'human' side is showing...

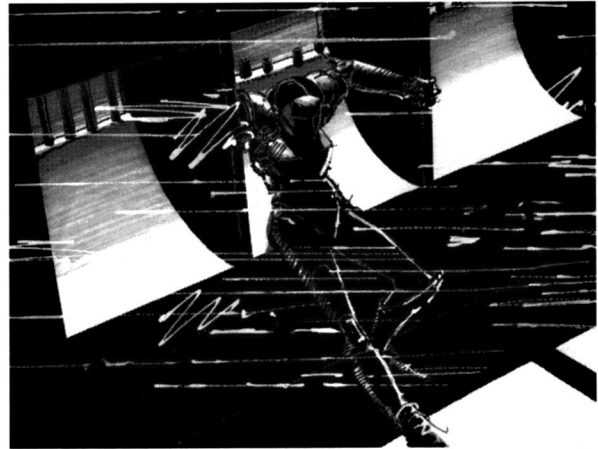
"Sure, goggle at me. Go on, have a good look. I don't bite. Am I not a spectacular image of evolution? <SNAP!> Oh yeah, I lied about the biting. Stop whining. You've got another one. Anyone else fancy a gawk?"

BLOODY VALENTINE – (HUMAN, REP 8)

Struggling to survive in the face of determined Operative action, notorious serial Killer Bloody Valentine has decided to take up the Circuit's Tynes Amnesty. Before joining the Downtown Circuit, she had spent nearly two years in Newtown, at the edge of Cannibal Sector 4. Resisting the temptation of purchasing some security by joining one of the local cognates, Bloody Valentine found herself being hunted by the infamous Green Bag squad, still bitter from the "Tremor Travis" incident. She decided it was time to play safe.

Now on the Circuit, Bloody Valentine has made several enemies during her short and destructive stay. Vigadeth, another serial Killer vying for amnesty, has shown his dislike for Valentine because he sees her as competition, but it is Morbid – a sector cannibal – who has made it perfectly clear that he wants her dead.

It is alleged that Bloody Valentine has something to hide, and Morbid suspects what it is. Bloody Valentine has spent a great deal of time travelling the ruins of Cannibal Sector 2 where Morbid lives, and he has claimed that she is in fact a SLA Industries Operative. He says that she is looking for something in the ruins, and he has heard her send reports and messages back to SLA Central. Morbid suspects that she is a spy sent out by Cloak Division to watch over the complex politics of Downtown society, but as yet this is all just speculation, and he has offered no evidence. Still, many have listened to the old hermit and are now watching Valentine very carefully, because deep down, everybody in the Downtown Circuit has something to hide.



Bloody Valentine is a true martial arts expert, using her small, lithe figure – and, occasionally, a suit of Silverback – to complement her killing moves. She also carries a fine set of custom vibro claws which she uses with amazing precision. Many believe her to be a Soft Company Op from Orienta because of her training and appearance. She has pretty eyes shadowed by an ugly mask, and a foul mouth which is almost as dangerous as her claws.

Bloody Valentine intends to fight her way up to rank 9 and then return to Orienta as a Contract Killer intent on claiming territory. In Orienta, Contract Killers are free from all restraint and run amok, fighting a continual turf war for locations and supremacy. A single Contract Killer can control and terrorise an entire sector if they have enough of a following behind them, and Bloody Valentine's popularity grows by the day. The Orientan Killers are nervously considering her unpleasant arrival. Third Eye can't wait...

"Yeah? COME ON YA FUCKER! I'll string y'up by yer hairy balls! I'll stick these friggin' claws so FAR up yer ARSE that y'll speak with a fuckin' LISP!"

LUCKY DIE – (ABHORRENT, REP 5)

Lucky Die could be described as the Downtown Circuit's pet, a large, hairy monstrosity that the Contract Hunter Asaki Mishua found lurking in the filthy sewers under Cannibal Sector 5. Lucky Die is an Abhorrent, an animal with a minimal sense of obedience. There are three things it understands, 'eat', 'sleep' and 'kill'. Everything else is tenuous at best.

Lucky Die lives in a huge cage at the back of one of the deeper Downtown venues under the supervision of its master, Asaki. Whenever the Abhorrent is required for a fight, all proceeds and winnings go to Asaki for a massacre well done. Lucky Die gets a live sewer pig for its troubles, which it devours in a disgusting manner. Many of the audience pay out to see this horrible spectacle, which they applaud like some sick performance.



All challenges against Lucky Die are “one on one”, at close quarters with no guns allowed. Asaki is very particular about who Lucky Die fights, constantly complaining about fighting conditions and referee’s decisions. Basically, Asaki is not happy until Lucky Die leaves the ring with it’s opponent’s heart in its jaws. The unpleasant Contract Hunter is all smiles then.

Lucky Die has now mauled it’s way through 17 years on the Downtown Circuit, and is still going strong and growing fast. When Lucky entered the Circuit, it was 7 foot from head to tail. Seventeen years on, it has grown to nearly 12 foot in length. Staff organisers are afraid that Lucky’s cage will not be able to restrain it if continues to grow much further. Lucky would have been put down years ago, but it is simply too popular to kill off. Asaki would have screamed the place down if he thought his precious pet were in any danger, anyway. Asaki loves the money it brings, and he is desperate to keep it alive. Asaki darts the Abhorrent with Ultra Violence on a daily basis, and Lucky Die is now a complete addict. Its anger reaches terrifying peaks when the drug starts to take effect.

In recent years, Asaki has had to use Blaze UV, since the standard UV now fails to stir the old monster; a stronger dosage is necessary. The problem is that the more Blaze UV Lucky takes,

the more uncontrollable it has become, and the organisers don’t know why. Asaki has always kept the beast’s drug addiction secret, as it violates Circuit Law for animals. Lucky Die is an old, mean animal on the verge of an eternal frenzy which only death will halt.

“Look at it, eh! What a fakkin’ specimen! Get those eyes, there’s murder in ‘em, like ‘es sayin’ ‘Who’s next, fucker?’, heh heh. Ya gonna bring ya ole man back a bounty, ain’tcha...? Good boy. C’mon Bill, Let ‘im out...”

Asaki Mishua, Contract Hunter SCL 5A-CK, showing off his prize to a bookie.

PIG MAN – (HUMAN, REP 7)

A legend amongst streetwise Downtowners and the cause of thousands of nightmares, Pig Man is the Skin Trade’s most lethal enforcer, and a figurehead for everything that the vile organisation stands for. A huge shambling lummoX wearing a specially designed pigs-head helm and a cloak of skins, he stinks of decay, death and the sewers. He speaks only in short, sneering taunts and jibes, and flatly refuses to play to the crowd. Nothing is known about him, even inside the trade, but there is little to know. He gave up his real name, along with his interests, his family and his contacts, when he entered the Trade twenty years ago. Now Robert Wood is long gone, and only Pig Man remains.

People unaware of his position have little interest or respect for such a malodorous, uncharismatic Killer – his costume is outlandish, but not spectacularly so, and there’s little, on the surface, to distinguish him from the ranks. Even more than his brutality and his stench however, it is the weight of the organisation that he carries around with him that intimidates his opponents. Even hardened maniacs live in fear of being sold into agonised slavery by the Skin Trade.

Pig Man uses his irregular Circuit appearances as a particularly unpleasant method of bagging new meat for the Trade. He has a standing offer to fight any challenger to first blood, with liberty being the prize – freedom for a previously abducted friend or relative of the challenger’s if Pig Man loses, wagered against the challenger’s enslavement by the Trade if he wins. It’s good publicity and pretty secure – it’s almost always just untrained civilians, desperate to recover a missing daughter or son, who take up the offer. Out of 2,535 such challenges in ten years, Pig Man has lost just 142.

The real cause for his infamy however is his policy regarding better trained opponents. He always fights real Killers to incapacitation, and a loophole in Circuit law means that once he has downed an enemy, there is no legislation to stop him making off with his victim. Those he carries away are never seen in the public eye again. Savvy Killers give him a very wide berth, but there is always some naïve new SLA hopeful eager to wipe out



such evil corruption, and his matches send a steady stream of young starlets to the cattle markets, never to reappear.

"Think you have a chance, you lilywhite prick? Your sister begged me not to sell her. We had to cut her tongue out. Can't have the merchandise bothering the clients... She may even still be alive, but you'd better pray not. Her death would have been a mercy. I know where she is, but I'll never tell you. Ah, does that hurt? Your pain is nothing. Imagine how her terror, helplessness and pathetic hope tear at her, every minute of every day. Imagine how desperate she is to be saved. Imagine knowing you'll never see anyone or anything you love, ever again. Ready to take that risk, just for a futile hope of redeeming her? Got your affairs in order? Come on then, asshole. Come to the Trade."

FOX GLOVE – (FROTHER, REP 8)

A mongrel of numerous cultures, Fox Glove continually darts around the various worlds and fighting arenas. She is a Frother by birth, forever on the run from her past, denying her memories with shivering disgust. Fox Glove loathes having to live with the knowledge that she comes from the Frothers. She hated every moment of her upbringing, considering herself more sophisticated and cultured than her rowdy relatives. In her youth, her parents laughed at her books on etiquette and elocution, but it just made her more determined to get away from these barbarians.

On her eighteenth birthday, Fox Glove set fire to the family mansion, along with the rest of her family as they slept. She was sensible enough to steal the most precious heirlooms from the family vault before escaping into the night, of course. By the time her clan found out what had happened, Fox Glove had fled into the lowest regions of Downtown to start her new life. Before pursuing a new career, she quickly pawned all her family relics for some new equipment and headed for the Downtown Circuit.

To escape detection, Fox Glove used some of her funds to enrol as a Contract Hunter, ready to head off-world until the heat died down. Her new cover lasted well, and the constant travel, jumping from planet to planet, nourished her sense of adventure. Fox Glove learned a new aspect of life, viewing the World of Progress in its most literal sense. She got to see a huge variety of cultures, and gained a wealth of knowledge from every place she visited. The life of a Hunter was not enough for Fox Glove, however; she wanted greater luxury.

Fox Glove knew she could not return to SLA Industries after the incident with her family mansion, and to enter the Soft Company scene would have been suicide. She needed the protection of the Downtown Circuit, the most popular haven for criminals, murders and escapees in the entire World of Progress. Fox Glove decided it was time to become a standard Killer, and continue to travel SLA in the comfort of the limelight. Despite Contract Law, Fox Glove is still barraged by assassination attempts, particularly



from the Frother clans. As long as foolish Frothers are dropping dead under her sword however, everything's just fine.

Fox Glove prefers to compete in New Paris and Meny because of the high society lifestyle that she murdered her family for, but so much jet-setting around the World of Progress has made her aloof and arrogant. She puts herself above everyone else, both in sophistication and combat skill. Fox Glove has had it too easy for too long, and if she's not careful, her petty distractions will claim her life.

"Do you really expect me to bow before you in defeat? Filthy scum. Enjoy your fantasy now, because it's about to turn sour in the light of my glorious victory, peasant!"

THE FROWN – (SHAKTAR, REP 9)

From the bleakness of Kn'nth's Eighth Moon comes The Frown, a harsh, twisted brute obsessed with the downfall of those who set his caste aside in the name of honour and purity. The Frown despises these things. There is nothing honourable about this monster, and he lives solely for corruption and deceit. He strives for anything that will disgust or disgrace the Shaktar race.

The Lord Shahanti is outraged by this abomination and wants him utterly destroyed. Many loyal warriors have taken a pledge to exterminate him, but none have succeeded. The Frown benefits mightily from his warped physique. He is a hulking mountain, defying even the most unusual bodily standards of the Eighth Moon, and is the caste's savage champion, sent to Mort to halt the purge of their cruel kind. The giant heretic has slaughtered every Shaktar that he has come across.

Although The Frown appears more like a Chagrin than a Shaktar, he has a stunning intelligence and terrible cunning. The Frown loves to taunt his enemies before a match, so that he might relish



his victory all the more as he rips their heads from their limp bodies.

When The Frown first arrived at the Downtown Circuit, representatives from DarkNight watched in awe as the lumbering troll ripped a Shaktar apart with his bare scaly hands and drank the blood as it gushed from the torn heart. He was ideal to cause fear and hatred in those who supported SLA Industries. DarkNight wanted him as a weapon of subversion.

The Frown accepted the position gladly. Through DarkNight, he could get protection and finance, and the best slots for killing his rival brothers in front of Mort's impressionable public. The Frown is desperate to see Lord Shahanti humiliated before his peers, so as he can return to his dark people as a hero. The corporate wing of SLA Industries has started wondering if there will be money to be made from this obscure and mutated sub-species if The Frown massacres the prime champion of the Shaktar race, The Bond.

The sad truth is that The Frown doesn't even really give a damn for the Eighth Moon Shaktars, but they support him and he can use that to benefit himself. The Frown will debase any ethic or moral to fulfil his sick and selfish goals.

"Yes, you could consider that correct. I am in no way associated with the soft ones, the lap dogs. I have come here to complete what should have been done long centuries ago. I will destroy Shahanti and his sycophantic kind. Do you hear me? I have come for you."

THE PERFECTIONIST – (HUMAN, REP 9)

To most spectators of the Downtown Circuit, The Perfectionist, one of its finest Killers, is just a mask, a relentless killing machine. He is another beast of Mort, obsessed with control and death. Once the lights go down, the opponent has fallen and The Perfectionist leaves the ring, the face behind the helmet becomes altogether human. For seven years, this dark, shadowy man has passed through numerous arenas, killing his opponents with lethal accuracy, with little more than a whisper of his background leaking out.

The Perfectionist is a Contract Killer for DarkNight, and never strays far from his home – Downtown. SLA Industries have spent the last seven years trying to hunt him down and kill him, but The Perfectionist is as good as his name, and all attempts on his life have failed. The Perfectionist is an espionage specialist, and he relies on stealth and surprise to bring about the downfall of his oppressors. In many respects, The Perfectionist operates like Deity, SLA Industries' famous Contract Killer, leaving no margin for error. The Perfectionist can't afford to slip up, especially since there are so many big names who want him dead. Like Deity, his true identity is unknown – that would be too much of a risk, so wild rumours spread concerning The Perfectionist's motives, and about the face that lies behind the mask.

Some believe The Perfectionist to be a Espionage Dark Finder from Cloak Division. Others think he is an ex-War Criminal;





surely his skill in combat is proof. The real secret is that he is trying to prove his talents to SLA Talent Scouts, so that he can join SLA Industries and stop running from a force that he can never defeat. Unfortunately, The Perfectionist is simply killing too many good SLA Contract Killers to prove himself capable of loyalty – the more he tries to convince SLA of his potential, the more he makes himself out as a figure of subversion. The Perfectionist also can't discuss the prospect with anyone because it would be like signing his own death warrant, for DarkNight – his present financier – would immediately seek to kill him, and despite his expert stealth skills, The Perfectionist could not escape the detection of both major powers. All The Perfectionist can do is wait for the opportunity to arise, nothing more, and he's been waiting for 7 years already.

Money could be made from The Perfectionist if someone were willing to take the chance, but until that day, The Perfectionist keeps running and hiding.

"Clean fight. Dead Novice. Happy Crowd. Perfect Finish. Good Night."

VIDEO NASTY – (FROTHER, REP 10)

The tolerance of clan Frothers to SLA's combat drugs is legendary. Even Ultra Violence, which kills most of its faithful users within two years, seems to have no lasting effect on these wild warriors. Few people know however that as well as genetic tolerance, the Frothers understand and respect the drugs, and treat them with the care that they deserve. Unsurprisingly, there are always a few cases where Frothers continue to pump their veins with Blaze UV as if the after-effects were irrelevant. Most of these end up as burnt out as other junkies, but a very few seem to adapt. One such case is the Downtown-based traitor and subversive Contract Killer, Video Nasty.

The crowds love Video Nasty. He is loud, psychotic and, most importantly, isn't afraid to take chances in a bloodthirsty encounter. Looking at Nasty, there is nothing to distinguish him from many others of his race, but the thing that separates him is his history, the vicious events that bought him the universal hatred of his people. Nasty is one of a pair of twins who murdered their royal parents, the chief of Clan McGyver and his wife. This tragedy was mourned by all, as the McGyver is the undisputed head of the Clans. The two boys had been forcibly addicted to Ultra Violence prematurely in order to pass the coming of age that all young Frothers must undertake, but this dubious policy brought one of the greatest disasters in the history of Clandom. The McGyver's sons slaughtered their parents and sisters in a dreadful bloodlust that had them cast out and hunted by their outraged uncle. One entered the Downtown Circuit and took on the persona of Video Nasty. The other, just minutes younger than Nasty, failed to recover from the burning rage that took his family. The young Frother escaped to the planet Morol, and deteriorated into an insane serial Killer, Nucleus, who still hunts pointlessly for the rest of his family in the cold cities of the planet.

Video Nasty remains a traitor to Clandom, protected by Circuit Law. Video Nasty isn't just hunted by the Frother Clans, however. Arthur Mellie from the Department of Psychology and Psychosis wants the brothers for medical 'examination'. Nasty has now earned full amnesty and can't be touched, and he has warned the press that a brooding lunatic like Nucleus should be left alone. Many regard Video Nasty as a man without fear or regret, yet even he would not challenge his brother now, and Nasty himself is pretty far gone, as his name suggests. The lone Frother takes his name from the Vid Cam built onto his shoulder that he uses to give the viewers something really explicit to be revolted by.

"Yaaargh! Die! Die! That's how we like it... Hang on 'til I wipe the damn screen. There, see what I mean, reecal messy. Hehe!"

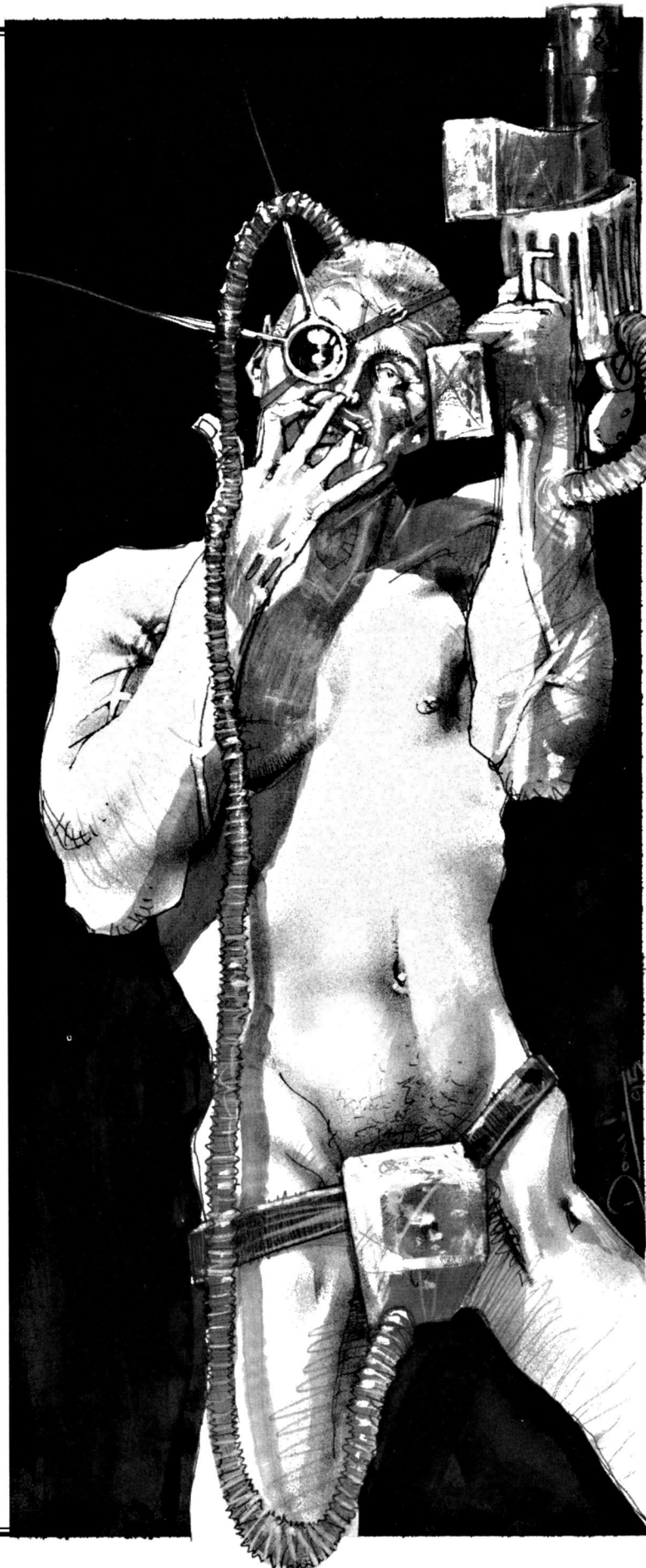
SHADE MAKER – (EX-WAR CRIMINAL, REP 8)

The stereotype image of an ex-War Criminal is a huge, hulking figure, bristling with weapons and garbed in ancient, battered armour. Such sights tell tales of a century of bloodshed through the eyes of a madman. Shade Maker's aura of fear and terror is... well, different to say the least. His eccentricity is as disturbing as that of any heavily armed, shell-shocked war case. Shade Maker is a renown sadist and cannibal from the War World Charlie's Point. On the Downtown Circuit, Shade Maker deals with his anguish in own special way.

Unlike a great deal of ex-War Criminals, Shade Maker is aware of his mentally deranged state, and uses it as fuel in the arenas. Along with his incurable sociopathy, Shade Maker's psychosis is stimulated by the corrosion of the chromium implants that he had grafted on to his head and groin at the beginning of his career in the Militia. The implants began to dissolve after 4 years on Charlie's Point, when Shade Maker was a Colonel, stuck on the hellish planet for a decade-long tour. After leading his troops into dense jungle territory, the patrol was attacked by a Thresher nerve gas that warped their now-fragile minds, and they slowly slipped into tribalism. Instead of leading his band of disturbed hunters, Shade Maker began to kill and eat them as a result of his severe brain damage. His armour and weapons were lost, and he relied purely on animal cunning and physical strength in order to survive, feeding on anyone he could catch. When his service ran out after a decade in the dark jungles, he was returned to Mort as a "sane" man. Once Shade Maker touched SLA soil, he killed his security guards and ran off into Downtown to find a new means of survival.

Many of the Circuit organisers want Shade Maker banned on the grounds of hygiene. He never washes, even after Gorezones and sewer crawls, and this alone would be enough to make him a dangerous and unpleasant opponent. When you add in his cannibalistic tendencies and repulsive decaying implants, Shade Maker is truly disgusting.

"...time for fun..."





BURN – (BRAIN WASTER, REP 9)

The arrogance and malice of Brain Wasters is a well-known tendency the other races despise, yet the company tolerates them because they are extremely effective at their job. One particular Brain Waster is not tolerated, though. A Downtown outcast by the name of Burn, she is a blemish on the normally loyal hide of the Ebon races.

Burn is a renegade from SLA Industries. She deserted for an extremely simple reason – she couldn't take orders, especially under the stern eye of the Necanthropes. Rarely do members of the Ebon races stray from the path, for fear of what their monstrous superiors will do to them as a punishment for subversion. Burn found herself a life outside the typical existence of a Brain Waster. She didn't want to become like those horrific Necanthropes anyway, regardless of how much power they had. She fled her home and her race to become a Contract Killer in Downtown, where she could be protected by Circuit Law. She is popular on the Downtown scene because her kind are so rare outside of SLA's realm.

Burn was born, raised and trained on Caria, a cold, rural planet, which may account for some of her subversive nature. To grow up in the cold cities of Caria is to experience unrest at it's strongest. SLA Industries is engaged in constant activities to suppress the intense uprisings occurring there, and has been for the last century. Operatives from Caria are a fierce and hardy lot, and Burn was no exception, yet after 3 years of rigorous and unrewarding service she decided it was time to disappear.

Actually getting off Caria was very difficult. The planet has very strict laws on travel and immigration, and Burn was a SLA deserter, which ranked her with DarkNight enemy agents. She had to take the first safe Ion Drive ship out of Caria. She was hoping to head for the outskirts of the World of Progress, but the best she could do was to get passage to the very heart of SLA, Mort. Burn knew the Circuit Law could protect her until the heat died down; unfortunately, it shows no sign of doing so. Burn is a good fighter who, regardless of her antisocial nature and subversive status, fights honourably and competently, as if there is still a spark of decency left in her.

"Sometimes, I could just... burn."

THE LASH – (SECTOR MUTANT, REP 7)

The Lash is the first captive mutant from the ruins of Cannibal Sector 5. It is a small but malignant creature, no larger than an alsatian dog, but capable of stripping the flesh from an arm in a matter of seconds. Like many of the Killers on the Downtown Circuit, The Lash is shrouded in mystery. Although the mutant appears to be canine, it exhibits almost human instincts. People tell tall tales of where this creature's true origins lie, but they are always wrong...



Nearly twenty years ago, a Karma Technician named Dr. Raymond Ark and his team of researchers were studying the mental and physical regression of humans living in, and close to, Cannibal Sector 5. Ark was trying to locate the toxin that seemed to cause throwbacks and turn once-civilised people into horrid sector mutants. Despite the awful results of the toxin, it was truly fascinating because it promised a complete physical alteration, replacing advanced intellect with the heightened strength and prowess so common in the Carrien species. Ark considered the process to be evolutionary. He called his toxin "Doolittle", and aimed to use it to progress the human body rather than regress it. Ark wanted to deactivate Doolittle's manipulation of the brain so that the only thing to change would be the body. A controllable beast with ungodly strength, dexterity and human intellect would be perfect for a new mould of Militia on Dante and the other War Worlds. In time, Ark's mutants might even exceed the capabilities of the Stormers...

Which was Ark's downfall.

Karma were not prepared to weaken Phantom Pregnancy. Too many people would lose jobs and status and besides, Ark's work was unethical by comparison. Doolittle and its master had to be buried and forgotten, so Karma arranged an accident for Ark and his team.

The Doolittle scientists fell victim to a chemical explosion in their research labs. As they crawled from the falling wreckage, they

knew themselves to be victims of another SLA cover up. All of the survivors had been doused in the Doolittle toxin. It was a shame that Ark had not researched a cure for Doolittle, because as their skin absorbed the toxin, their fate was sealed.

Ark and his team fled to Cannibal Sector 5 with the remains of their notes and materials to try and find a cure, but Doolittle worked too swiftly, and the team soon underwent the regressive process. From that day on, a new breed of sector mutant began to prowl the ruins – the Karma Techs, who had worked for a cure until their last thought, before becoming the victims of their study. The mutants still instinctively protect their Doolittle shrine in CS 5 with a fierce pride.

As for Raymond Ark, he is now a permanent attraction of the Downtown Circuit, and fights under the name of The Lash.

"Hey! Guys quick! Come in! I think I've solvgggggrrrrrrrr!" Last spoken words of Dr. Raymond Ark.

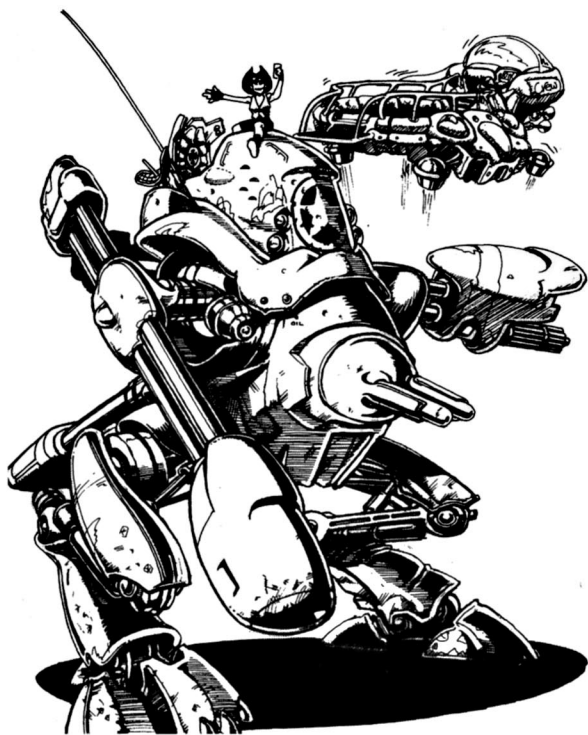
FRITZ – (TEK TREX, REP 7)

Tek Trex drones are usually viewed with a certain wry amusement. Exceptions occur when they show up in large numbers – or when the menace comes in the form of the huge, looming brute named Fritz. Nicknamed after one of early Killa Chassis powersuits, the Fritz drone towers 3m high. It is a slow but immensely strong machine that nobody but the truly foolhardy will challenge, a faceless horror without mercy or compassion. People's perception of Tek Trex changes when Fritz brutally hammers an opponent into a puddle. Fritz has several advantages in combat, after all. It feels no pain, and it only drops when its Circuits die.

Fritz is controlled by the Tek Trex terrorist "Puppeteer", a renowned but completely anonymous subversive who operates her 'children' via a protected computer/satellite linkup. She is only seen through the devastation she causes, with the help of her tiny Vitos and Scarabs armed with high explosives and vid cams. Fritz is one of Puppeteer's personal favourites, because it is different from everything else she works with. Tek Trex's usual advantage is their small size and high versatility, but when Puppeteer controls the huge monster, it is a challenge for her sinister talents. Fritz is by no means a simple programme.

Fritz's frame is taken from a Killa Chassis haulage/labour drone, giving the machine the size and bulk of a LowWave. Puppeteer found the chassis buried deep in junk in a scrap yard whilst on one of her salvage sprees. She saw its potential immediately and decided to recondition it. The result was Fritz.

Puppeteer wants to get revenge on SLA Industries for their rejection of her work in 885 SD. This was during the 'Chrome Warrior' era, short lived and destined to fail. Puppeteer was a front runner for a variety of new concepts that never saw the light of day. Her aim was to become rich from her long efforts and retire to New Paris, but her dreams died and her plans failed as cybernetics went horribly out of fashion and Rust Alley appeared.



Bitter about losing her job and prospects, Puppeteer uses Fritz as her fists and always answers a challenge in the Downtown Circuit. Puppeteer makes a special effort if Fritz's opponent is biogenetic, as this type of research was the apparent cause of her sudden downfall.

Fritz could be the only possible lead to catching the elusive Puppeteer, but hardly anyone would dare to approach the monster in order to rig it with tracking bugs, especially when its controller is the master of cybernetic disguise.

"GOOD EVENING FOOLS... I HAVE BROUGHT MY PET AND AM READY TO PLAY... SHALL WE START THE BIDDING...? NO MISBEHAVING... OR I BLOW THE PLACE WITH THE OTHER PET I BROUGHT TONIGHT. WHERE IS IT...? NOW THAT WOULD BE TELLING..."

VIGADETH – (HUMAN, REP 8)

Vigadeth is a serial Killer on a secret mission. Hunted by a variety of Operative squads for numerous acts of multiple murder, Vigadeth now walks free. He has now turned his attentions to the Downtown Circuit, where the hated Slops cannot touch him unless they meet him on his own level in the ring. Vigadeth is very deceptive, assuming the appearance of an average serial Killer who wants nothing more than to slaughter the weak and innocent. Behind the visage of the grinning maniac lies an intelligent young man who wants to shake of the scum of Downtown and go up in the world, at any cost. Before Vigadeth

turned to a life of murder in the backstreets, he was a student in Meny. Studying Chemistry and Ancient Literature, his original aim was to join Karma's Drug Division and become a corporate with the help of some additional training. The seeds of Vigo Mortensen's insanity had long been planted however, and they eventually nurtured him into Vigadeth the murderer.

As a child, Vigo lived with his parents in Lower Downtown. Both were unemployed and always would be, but their greatest wish was that their only son could be someone in life – a someone who worked for SLA Industries. Little Vigo was always out playing in the streets with his friends, pretending to be Ops, shooting each other with fake guns, playing dead with splatter packs. His parents thought it was just fun, until his playmates dared him to 'take a BPN' and venture into Cannibal Sector 1. Vigo set off for the ruins, and in the filth and stench he found a dangerous passer by – the mass-murderer Sonny Boy.

Sonny Boy asked little Vigo what he was doing in such a bad place. Vigo told him that he was looking for serial Killers to shoot in the name of SLA. Sonny Boy replied that he didn't have to shoot him; there was nothing wrong with murderers, they were just different, that's all. It was the beginning of a terrible friendship. Vigo was slowly but surely drawn into Sonny Boy's world of slaughter. When fully grown, Vigo did his training at Meny, but vanished immediately afterwards. He couldn't accept the company line any more. Vigo was not an Operative. He was Vigadeth the serial Killer.

On the Circuit, Vigadeth is given a wide birth. He knows a lot of dangerous people. At first he was treated as cannon fodder, but the organisers swiftly realised there was more to him than met the eye. He is a vicious Killer, and is qualified to work in the most mentally challenging departments of SLA, thanks to his joint degree in Chemistry and Literature. Vigadeth uses a modified version of Shatter, and is presently trying to organise some form of society for the cognates without attracting the attention of SLA Industries.

"Soon we will rise. My approaching amnesty will benefit a cause you could not possibly comprehend."

QUOTE THROAT – (THRESHER PILOT, REP 7)

When he enters the ring, he is silent. He kills with clinical precision, displaying stunning reflexes and great strength. Quote Throat, as a representative for Thresher, is a Bookie's dream come true – he's almost guaranteed to slaughter every opponent he meets. He is the perfect Killer, and the perfect emblem of rival opposition. Despite these skills, Quote Throat has a terrible problem. Unfortunately, he doesn't want to be a Contract Killer.

Quote Throat wants to be a poet, to study philosophy, and to become a legend of literacy. He composes many poems, and recites them at the end of his battles. Sadly, his literary aspirations are misplaced. He is a superb fighter, but is as poetic as a sewer

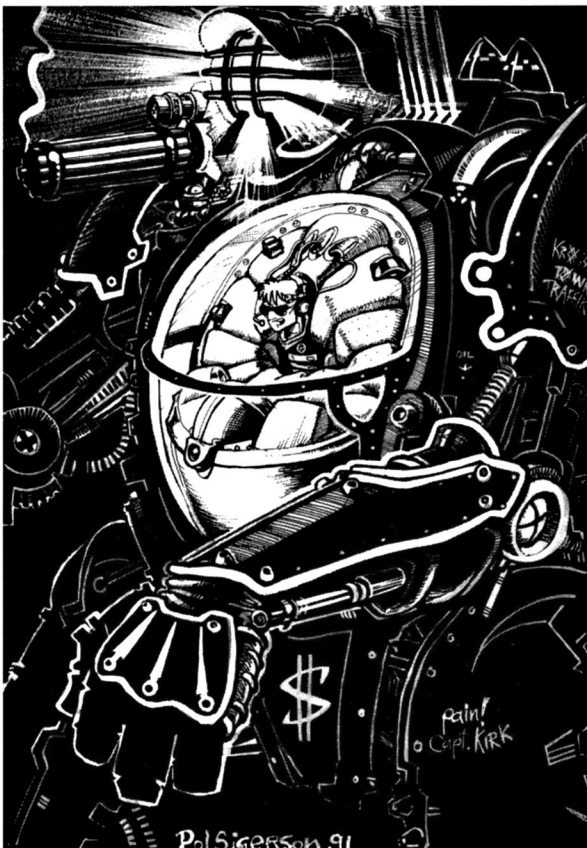
pig. He refuses to believe this though, and thinks that he is the greatest bard who has ever lived. Anyone who says otherwise is dead. Quote Throat is the first (and possibly the last) literary bully.

Initially, the organisers tried politely asking him not to recite his awful poetry to the audience – it was costing them spectators, and causing riots. Quote Throat was outraged. How dare they question his wonderful poems? The furious Thresher roared that any person who dared to challenge his art would die. Many did, looking upon Quote Throat first as an illiterate idiot, and then as their executioner. He continues to grate on the audience's nerves with his drivel, oblivious to their discomfort.

Nobody will now risk their neck to question him. Quote Throat goes berserk in the face of criticism, and has even been known to attack the audience when they told him to shut up. The pilot is completely insane – he really can't handle criticism at all.

The frightening thing is, people are starting to publish and buy his 'thoughtful' works. This is not because they're any good, it's because Quote Throat's fame is growing, and his work is seen as memorabilia.

Quote Throat is a camp, flamboyant peacock with large streaks of violence and a heavy addiction to Alice and alcohol (especially expensive red wine). He is also arrogant, self centred, childish and an utter psychopath, which should, on reflection, amply qualify him possessing for an 'artistic temperament'. The long and the



short of it though is that this maniac is far from creatively talented, and his true calling is behind the controls and triggers of his custom "Close Nitt" Powersuit.

"Life inches by, a doll on crutche... Hey! You! You over there! Yes, you in that revolting pink jump-suit thing. Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Eh... um... the men's room, honest..."

"GET BACK TO YOUR SEAT! NOW!! YOU'RE CURDLING MY CREATIVE JUICES!"

BABYFACE – (CANNIBAL MUTANT, REP 9)

Babyface is a malformed nightmare. It is nearly legend, like Halloween Jack and Bane Root. A shambling golem, completely silent, with no understanding of sanity or control, it has gone beyond male or female, becoming effectively neuter. Like its fellow icons, Babyface has an aura, a presence that is recognised but never truly understood. There is a feeling of discomfort when this creature enters the Downtown venues. Its aura is one of disease and feverish insanity, its horrific face left to the imagination as the spectators stare in awe at the dirty, doll-faced mask.

Babyface is regarded as a vanguard of its kind, the shadowy mutant serial Killers of Downtown. It is apparent that SLA is facing a new organisation, but the goals are obscure. SLA is not so much afraid of what it knows about serial Killers as about what it doesn't, and with the Tynes Amnesty, serial Killers are becoming more common on the Downtown Circuit.

SLA psychologists argue that serial Killers do not operate in large groups. A big organisation of murderers is not possible. Murder is a personal thing to the Killer, something that cannot be shared with others except the occasional very small and concentrated grouping like Sector Cognates, Mind Tarot and Red Death. The name 'Mesha' means nothing. However, Downtown civilians have reported sightings of large collections of infamous Killers. Nobody has got close enough to hear their sinister discussions, of course. Babyface has been sighted at these meetings, honoured and respected.

Babyface was once the head of a deadly cognate, one of the largest on Mort. Unfortunately, they were all caught by an Operative squad on a Black BPN, assigned to intercept them. Babyface managed to escape before they reached him, killing a Stormer and bolting back down into the lower regions of Downtown. One of the captives, Grinning Jill, explained to psychologists that Babyface, or – as she called it – 'the father' spoke to her through telepathy. According to the murderer, Babyface is a fallen SLA genius, and its protection of the brood through the power of its mind sustained their 'infection' for years. This could still just be the mad ramblings of a captured maniac; there is nothing to suggest that Babyface was originally from the Ebon races, after all.

Perhaps the silent monster is fighting for its cognate's amnesty, or maybe it's just killing for the sake of it, nourishing its unearthly madness. Either way, Babyface never fails to conquer or disturb.

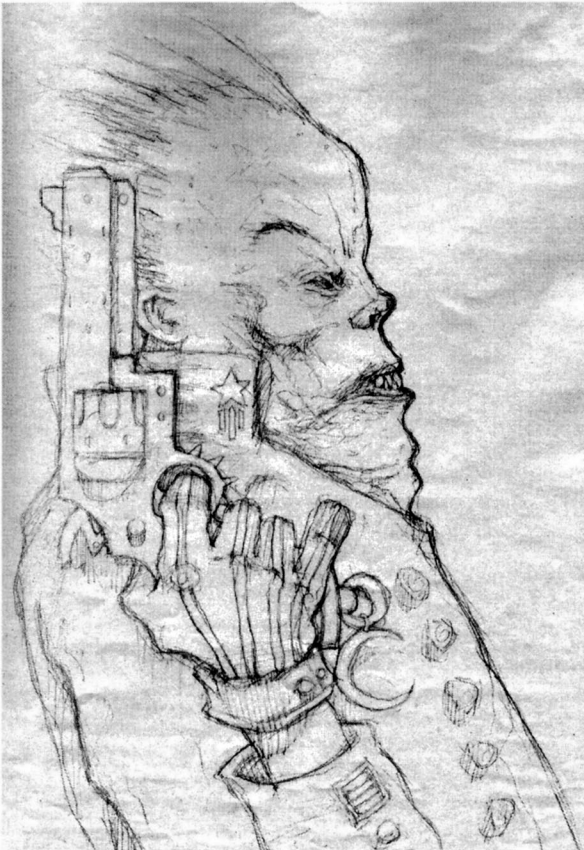
"Father is out there waiting. It tells me so... Babyface will save me yet, and I shall have their hearts again."

Grinning Jill, Human Serial Killer, in conversations with psychiatric investigators, 903SD.

MORBID – (CANNIBAL HUMAN, REP 7)

Morbid is something like a wise old hermit of corruption, with the muscle to back up his words. The festering semi-human is a permanent resident of Cannibal Sector 4, and travels out every month to make some money through acts of brutality and a few words of wisdom and knowledge, always available for the right price. Public opinion of Morbid is mixed. Some regard him as a valuable source of information, whereas others see him as a decaying old grouch who likes to comfort his vanity by battering his handsome opponents until they are as ugly as he is. Morbid is warped by his deformities, and takes out his resentment on others who are "prettier than him" for no reason other than sheer bloody-minded jealousy. Although he may look like a huge shambling carcass of decaying flesh, he is a strong and formidable opponent, capable of inhuman acts of savagery.

Morbid was originally a SLA Operative who made a living by working the various Cannibal Sectors and filling in update reports



for Cloak Division. He gained his unpleasant cannibal status because of his fascination with the grim way of life that existed in the ruins, the harsh and constant struggle for survival. The environment became too intense for Morbid, and when he returned home to Uptown he felt increasingly like an outsider. He eventually decided that the only place he could find comfort was in the rotting plains of the Cannibal Sectors. During his time there, Morbid caught one of the twisted viruses that infest the ruins. This disease made his body waste and wither.

Morbid has now been living in Cannibal Sector 4 for nearly 7 years, eating garbage and whatever he can catch – Operatives, for example. It was only when he was allowed to participate in the Downtown Circuit that was he able to afford decent food.

Morbid's brain hasn't deteriorated like most of the true cannibals in his territory, however. He only eats human flesh to survive, and he prefers to by better food whenever he can afford to – most of the time, nowadays.

Morbid has seen a great many things in his travels through the ruins, and will pass on information for the right price. Without payment, he is completely disinterested. He has no loyalties, but he particularly despises SLA Industries and its Ops, for he thinks they deserted him in his of need. He would be the first to agree that such a time has long since passed.

"Fuck off, pretty boy! This food is mine, alright?! I earned it through manglin' sweet faces like yours, now unless you're lookin' for information – or you're a weird pervert – piss off!"

HOLOCAUST – (GREATER CARRIEN, REP 10)

As old as Downtown and as ugly as time, Holocaust storms around the venues like an outsized bully in a nervous schoolyard. Holocaust is the only Greater Carrien on the Circuit, and that's the way he likes it. After so many years in the arenas, Holocaust has learned Killan and turned his back on his Carrien heritage. This isn't surprising considering the true nature of Greater Carriens – self serving, violent and totally domineering. In the Downtown Circuit, Holocaust has found new things to order around. This includes anyone weaker or smaller than he is, and that is just about everybody.

Organisers of the Downtown Circuit are praying that Holocaust will take a fall by upsetting someone who's just as big and mean as he is. They aren't holding their breaths, however – like most bullies, Holocaust is wary of those who might beat him. At the moment there are only three members of the Carrien races on the Circuit, and one of those hardly counts. Holocaust does not want any more appearing, either. He enjoys the fear that his race causes, and he is certainly not willing to let anyone "muscle in" on his territory.

Holocaust's thuggish attitude bears a strong resemblance to that of his biogenetic parallel in Uptown, Chuerrin. Organisers have tried to push for a match between the two brutes, but Holocaust

refuses on the grounds of pride. He is openly scornful, saying that he is not prepared to stoop so low as to appear in Uptown, under the ghastly limelight and foolish glamour. The real reason, of course, is that Holocaust is scared. He suspects Chuerrin would hammer him into the ground, and that simply wouldn't do.

Holocaust has never been beaten in a challenge before, but then the loathsome Greater Carrien has never really challenged anything his own size. This is a habit he did not leave behind in the sector ruins – the typical power-crazed attitude of a Greater Carrien. Holocaust's every instinct is to bully and enslave his peers, so as to gain control. He has never forgotten the law of the pecking order.

Snake Eyes is disgusted by Holocaust's conduct on the Circuit, and intends to pull the vile old thug off his pedestal. Snake Eyes remembers the way he was pushed around by his "superiors", and is desperate to help put an end to it by making an example of Holocaust. The Greater Carrien hates Snake Eyes, calling him "lesser" and a "weak fool", but in truth he is worried, because Snake Eyes is getting famous and it's obvious he's far smarter than normal Carrien. An advanced Carrien smarter than a Greater Carrien? It's an outrage. Especially since the pesky runt has got the support of Blood Horn, the master of the Carrien races...

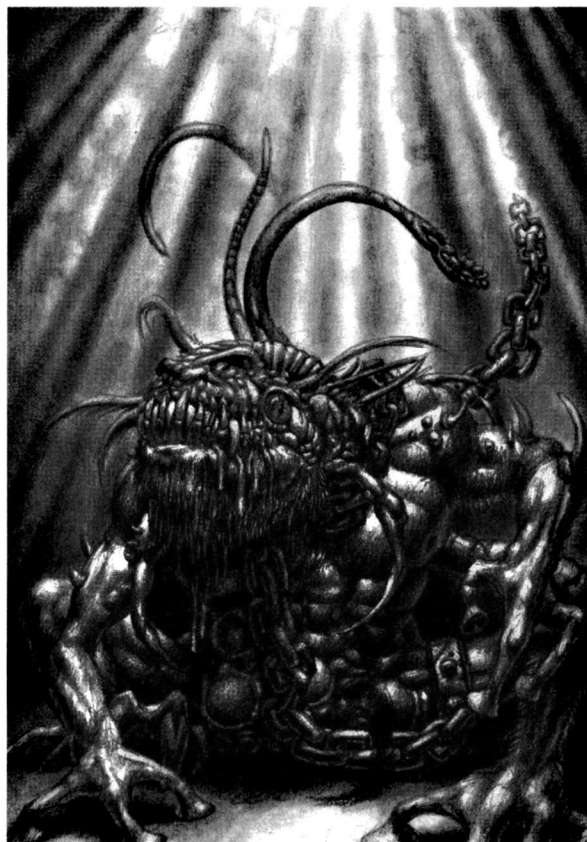
"Me bow to none! Defy I and me'll kill you. Dead, yeah."

THE BAD THING – (MUTANT CARRIEN, REP 8)

Deep in the bowels of the Downtown Circuit, the Bad Thing lies drooling in its dark pit. Unknowing, unforgiving, and utterly mad, it looks up at the outside world through incurious eyes. The Bad Thing has lived in its pit since the very earliest days of the Circuit, before the birth of any human organiser or Contract Killer alive today. Unlike the rest of the attractions, the Bad Thing is not really a fighter. It is far too big to be challenged by anyone other than the plain stupid. There are occasional challengers, and animals are often thrown into the pit with the beast so as to amuse audiences.

As far as anyone can tell, The Bad Thing is roughly 12 metres from head to tail. This makes it the largest Mutant Carrien recorded in history. It is permanently imprisoned in its pit, a profitable asset – for viewing purposes only – and yet after all these years, the money still rolls in. The gigantic mutant just grows bigger and meaner.

Regardless of all attempts to kill the monster, it continues to survive and grow as if it truly were indestructible. SLA scientists believe it to be not just one Mutant Carrien, but three all fused into one big, ugly creature. They think The Bad Thing has three brains, one in its skull and the other two hidden somewhere in its torso, hence the beast's ability to take repeated damage to its head and still fight to the bitter end. This may also account for the Bad Thing's size and unrivalled ferocity. Nothing concerning the Bad Thing's growth and outlandish physique has been proved.



Nobody wants to get close enough to examine the monster. Not very surprising, really – the Bad Thing cannot be tranquillised.

Like the rest of its unfortunate kind, the Bad Thing's body is racked with continual agonising pain that drives it berserk. It kills anything that it sees. This pain is all that the Bad Thing has ever known, that and the foul well in which it lives. If it could understand the concept of 'outside', it would wait for an opportunity to escape and tear through the world, in hope of taking the pain away.

The Bad Thing got its name from the awed comments of its first spectator back when the Downtown Circuit opened its gates, a young girl. The organisers thought that this was the perfect name for the perfect nightmare. The Bad Thing.

"Fucking hell. Look at that thing. Are there more like that? I'm gonna have nightmares for weeks."

Typical Downtown civilian's astonished comment while looking down at The Bad Thing.

THREAD – (STORMER 313, REP 10)

All who enter the gates of the Tynes Complex pay their respects to its senior Contract Killer, the huge Stormer named Thread. Taarnish's arch-enemy.

THE DIRECTORY

Thread is ancient. He was created back in the earliest days of SLA Industries, one of the original first caste who turned on their Conflict Alien masters, shaping the society we now call the World of Progress. It was a time of great loyalty, but Thread was always destined to turn his back on SLA Industries and fall into the hands of the opposition. He fought alongside Taarnish during the first expansions of Slayer's realm, but betrayal was inevitable.

Thread was always jealous of Taarnish. He thought that he should get more respect from Slayer, because he was smarter, more sophisticated and in general, better. Thread always viewed himself as the underdog, which lead him to constantly disobey orders. As far as Taarnish was concerned, Thread was troublesome and untrustworthy. He'd tried continually to cement mutual respect with Thread, so that they could work more efficiently within the unit, but this was never to be. Thread was determined to prove himself better than Taarnish.

Thread designed a fiendish double cross in 415SD that would bring about the end of Taarnish and his unit. He sold himself out to DarkNight and Thresher. Taarnish was planning to lead a raid on a DarkNight base, and Thread wanted to make sure he never left it. Thread thought his treachery would have been too obvious if he just simply told DarkNight about the plan, and besides, DarkNight might kill him too. He made a second deal, this time with Thresher, who would come in when the defences were low, giving Thread enough time to escape. He would then be returning to SLA Industries as the sole survivor.



Unfortunately, Thread underestimated the might of Taarnish and his unit. As the traitor fled from the first attack, the Stormer unit went on to destroy the Thresher intervention. Thread was ruined, his plan was a failure and nobody in the World of Progress would work with him. Thread spent the next 250 years in the shadows of Downtown, slowly working to regain status, operating as a prop. He made a name for himself working for civilians. He got great pleasure from reminding the authorities that he was still alive and functional after all those years.

When the Circuit began, Thread immediately entered, planning to make a new name in a different profession. It wasn't long before he began a championship amongst the Downtowners to determine their supreme fighter. This was not enough for him, though. He wanted to go further, expanding his business interests. Thread created the Circuit Law for Downtown, purchased the network of buildings that makes up the Tynes Complex, negotiated the amnesty with Cloak Division, and eventually went on to run the Downtown Circuit, a position that he still holds today. All other organisers operating there work beneath him and follow his directives. Thread maintains good relations with the present SLA representatives, who think he is utterly charming. He offers "lucrative deals" for their financial benefit. Taarnish is furious about the whole thing. He thinks that Thread should have been hunted down and killed years ago before he got too powerful. Now nobody can touch him.

Thread is very busy. He is extremely strong, but rarely has the time to compete these days. He takes on a few challengers each month, but rarely to the death; he makes huge profits from the Downtown Circuit, and hates to see a profitable Killer wasted. Despite his tusk enhancements, Thread is a very human-looking Stormer, which many people find unnerving, but even his appearance does not compare to his smooth and charismatic voice. It is totally inappropriate for his bestial appearance and hulking build. Despite his age, Thread intends to rule the Downtown Circuit for another 250 years, and he has the strength, money and contacts to do it.

"Mr. Thread! 'Universal Times'. Can you tell us when the Circuit intends to improve the working and fighting conditions in the Downtown arenas? Some say the venues are a fire hazard, and have been shown structurally unsafe."

"The Downtown Circuit has a policy of catering for spectators and contender's safety and privileges. On an hourly basis, our finest auxiliaries run an in-depth check on the Circuit's safety. These allegations are put about by 'subversive' objectors. I'm sure you know who I'm referring to."

"Errr... no? Do you, sir?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't possibly comment."

A reported newflash from Third Eye News and Universal Times Publications.



Winning is a feeling like no other. I found myself grinning like a wolf as I changed back into my civilian clothes. I was just putting my shoes on when I turned around to answer a knock on the doorframe and saw that a small, weasel-like man standing in the doorway. We stood there for a moment - I wasn't sure what he wanted, and he wasn't saying anything. Finally, he went for it.

"M-M-M-Mr. Argus?" He stammered.

"Yes." I didn't feel inclined to help him.

"I-I-I-I." he cleared his throat. "I represent Power Projects, the makers of your armour and cannon. We-we-we'd like to sponsor you in return for your displaying our logo on your armour."

Big time! I sat down on the bench, indicating a seat opposite. "What are you offering?"

He sat down, a little closer than I would have liked. "F-Free armour repairs, upgrades when you want them, and 3000c a month in expenses."

"Sounds fine. When do I get the fees?"

"A-As soon as you sign for them." A contract and pen appeared in his hands as if by magic. I took them from him and made ready to sign.

"I wouldn't do that," said a quiet voice from the corridor. The pen stopped in mid-signature. I looked up. Johnny Automatic was standing in the centre of the doorway. He looked down at the person sitting next to me, and indicated the hallway with a flick of his eyes. The weasel was more than happy to make himself scarce, and as he did so, Johnny sat down opposite me.

"Did you read that?" he asked, indicating the paper in my hand.

"No, but he said what I'd get."

The smile flashed by. "You would do well to read anything before you sign it. Read it now, or you may end up with rather more than you bargained for."

I looked through it properly. Sure enough, it was a lifetime contract to Georges's Pizza Beast, guaranteeing them sole display rights on my armour and weapons, in return for 50c a month and an 18-month termination notice period. I breathed an audible sigh of relief as I finished reading it.

"Grim, is it?" He chuckled softly.

I looked up at him. "Is it always like this?"

Johnny shook his head. "No, but you should be aware that anyone in the major leagues will only contact you via the circuit. They certainly won't send a slimy weasel to your changing rooms with a contract." He indicated a small logo,

no larger than a thumbprint, on his knuckle. "This here is from ITB. They pay me 1000c a month in expenses to occasionally tap someone on the head with it. When they offered me sponsorship, they hired a full Shaktarian bodyguard to deliver the invitation to their headquarters. There, they introduced me to their chief of operations, and offered me as many women as I wanted in addition to the sponsorship."

"Wow, they offer you women?"

His smile quirked again. "Yeah, but remember that if a sponsor or agency does offer you women, you mustn't take them."

"Why not?"

"There's not one of them that won't sell you out given the chance, and if they're not bugged to all hell and back, it'll be a miracle." He sounded weary. I decided not to push the issue. He stood up to leave. "Be seeing you."

"Yeah. Thanks." Once he'd gone, I sat, silent, in the room, looking at the piece of paper that would have chained me to oblivion.

I spent the next day in a sombre mood. The circuit is never everything it seems to be, and it's certainly not all that you see on the vids. I registered for a few events, then sat back and waited. Nothing happened. I registered for a few more - again, nothing. At the weekend, a hand delivered note appeared in my mailbox, written in expensive ink on New Parisian paper. It was a simple one-line message:

Get a real agent.

Three guesses as to the sender, I thought. It seemed like a good idea, though. I looked through my business folder, and while I couldn't find any agency cards, I was rather surprised to find a card of Johnny's. I'd never received one from him. He was obviously up to something. The phone was answered even before it started to ring.

"Todd." I wasn't a question.

"Yessir."

"Come to the uptown Karma Plaza in Henderson. Be there by midday." The line went dead in my hand.

I scrambled into the first set of clothes on the floor and took a gauss over to the sector. What with running to the station (and the mall), I made it to the plaza with at least twenty seconds to spare. A broad figure in an Arducci suit was standing in the centre of the plaza. It took me a half second to realise that it was Johnny. The look on my face must have been quite something, as he grinned at me.

"What, you thought I slept in my armour?" I shook my head mutely, suddenly bitterly regretting the casual outfit I had

thrown on. "Nice touch, coming in casuals. Makes them think that you've got other offers on the go."

I was pretty sure he knew the clothes were a mistake, but was just being too polite to mention it. He offered me a tie - "Just in case we get a stickler of a Maitre'd."

He went in to the Maison Chien, a very high-class restaurant with a unique range of meat dishes. Other franchises have been trying to crack their secret for years. When I last saw this place, the waiting list was six months. Johnny walked in as if he owned it.

The manager was by his side in less than a minute. Johnny shook his hand with a distinct lack of enthusiasm and indicated me.

"This is Mr Argus. While he is here, you are to treat him like my family." I think I blushed. Johnny leaned over conspiratorially. "It saves time if the waiters are treating you like royalty - the sponsors and agents don't try to pull anything silly."

We were seated within a minute, the waiters apologising the whole time for the delay. I sat down, feeling very nastily out of place in a pair of shredded jeans and a "Ma-XXX-imum Risk" T-shirt. The people I guess we were there to meet arrived promptly, greeting Johnny first and then me. There were three of them, identical clones from what I could see, even down to their cufflinks. The middle one took an envelope from his pocket and placed it on the table, then leant back.

Everyone looked at me, so I reached forwards, took the envelope and opened it. I started reading, lots of jargon and legal terms. Johnny took the paper from me without warning, and passed it back to them.

"The plain one, gentlemen," he said quietly.

The clone to the left took out a separate piece of paper and put it on the table. I picked it up and started reading.

It was good stuff. Agency representation with a decent mid-level firm, Power Projects sole sponsorship, 750c a month, free armour repairs, complementary ammunition, 10% cut of all fees paid to be paid. Way out of my league, to be honest - I'd been hoping for Flying Jelly to come through. Not that I was complaining.

There was a space on the bottom for signature and witness. I glanced across to Johnny, who nodded almost imperceptibly. I signed, and he witnessed. The whole thing was really trippy. As I placed the paper back on the table, number three took out another piece of paper and placed it on the table. Johnny took it, looked at it and smiles broadly, then placed it back on the table with a small shake of his head. I sneaked a look as

he put it back down - 100,000c advance, 500,000c on completion, one target, details to be given later.

We ordered and ate, sticking to polite small-talk about Velkra, Grissom and other inanities. The clones vanished, and we left. Johnny insisted that I ride with him in his top of the range Augustus. He drove it himself - curious, I would have thought he'd have had a driver.

"Johnny, Can I ask you something?"

He looked amused. "You normally do, lad."

"Why didn't you take the contract?"

He glanced over from his seat briefly, then he leant back into his seat. "What do you think the most powerful thing in the World of Progress is, young Todd?"

"Money. You can get anything with money."

He looked ahead into the dimness, the rain pounding on the windscreen. "Can you?" He sounded almost disinterested.

"Well, yeah, sure."

He turned his head slightly towards me. "Can you?" There was an edge to his voice, and I felt like a kid being told off for missing an obvious point. I was suddenly very aware that I was sitting in a car with one of the most lethal killers in the World of Progress.

"No?"

His smile quirks again. "No," he said firmly. "It can't buy anything really important. Loyalty. Affection. Freedom. A real challenge. Just the opposite, in fact - it drives them away."

"Is that why you turned down the contract?"

He went back to watching the road. "It didn't say who the target was on the form, did it?"

"No."

"Well, would you kill someone you'd never met for half a million credits?"

"No." The answer slipped out before I could think about it, and the atmosphere in the car eased substantially.

"So what makes you think I would?"

I thought about that for a second. Very carefully. "I suppose I just figured that that's the job - they say jump, we ask how high, right?"

He nodded slowly. "In many cases, it is. We're killers, that's what we do. In the lower circles, you might not have a choice. They offer the bone, and you've got to bite or you'll go hungry. And if you disobey... well..." He paused as the lights ahead of us went red. "There are a lot of fools out there with money that expect just that. It's down to you how you

prostitute yourself. I've never suffered fools gladly, but I've always been in a position to dictate terms. You might not be so fortunate."

We turned into my street and he pulled up outside my block.

"Seen any more of the ghost yet?" the question sounded off-hand, relaxed.

"I think so. Just before Screech got the jump on me again. I'm not sure though."

"I think he's after you for some reason. I haven't figured out why yet." Johnny turned in his seat to face me "I think it might be an idea for you to secure some better lodgings. You can afford it now, and these aren't safe."

"Just how did your card get into my house?"

He grinned and tapped the side of his nose. "Trade secrets, my son."

I got out of the car and closed the door, then a thought occurred to me. I leant down to the window.

"Don't think that I'm not grateful, because I am, extremely, but why are you doing all of this?"

"I like you. Besides, it's all part of the game."

The car roared away into the rain. Once again, the silence was deafening. I turned to look down the street, and I got that feeling again.

He knows I'm here.

I moved to the middle of the road, to make it harder for anything to sneak up on me.

I will show him what he faces.

A figure wearing a long coat walked up the road towards me, and stopped about 20 feet away, shimmering through the rain. It was big; difficult to tell the race. No tail meant it wasn't a Shaktar, and it wasn't quite huge enough to be a Chagrin, but it certainly could have been an enhanced Human or Stormer, or a really buff Waster. Between the trench-coat and the rain, it was impossible to make out any features. It stood in the centre of the road, watching me watch it.

There can be only one Hunter.

The figure started walking towards me, moving inhumanly smoothly, almost as if it was floating. I took a step back and groped for my weapons, before remembering that I was in casuals, and the only weapon I had was a rolled up tie in my back pocket.

Death will come to you now, as it has to those before you.

The figure seemed to sense that I was unarmed, and began to lope towards me. I bolted across the street to my block, hammered the door open and chained it shut behind me. I was running up the stairs and into my apartment as the front door burst inwards.

Running will only let you die tired.

I could hear the thing pounding up the stairs in uneven steps. It sounded like some of them were cracking under the weight. I slammed the door to the apartment and throw both my chairs and the bed behind it to reinforce it. Something heavy smacked into the door, and I could see the whole frame shudder.

No mere door will stop me.

I ran again, to the closet where I keep my kit. My gun was gone, as was my armour and even my blades. I reached down to my ankle and activated my emergency medical bleeper - it's an expensive service, but worth it - and hoped that there was a crew nearby. They claim they'll be there in up to 3 minutes in Uptown - up to 30 minutes in Downtown, which is no use at all, but they're good for home emergencies.

The door creaked horribly again, warning me that 3 minutes would be way too long. I dashed back to the main room and threw my own weight against the door, hoping to lend my strength to the broken wood.

Another thump knocked me backwards. The bed didn't quite topple on top of me, but only a desperate kick kept it upright. Outside the window, the roar of the medivac unit made itself known. I could see them preparing to land. No time for that. I sprinted through the flat and launched myself out of the window at them. I just managed to catch the edge of landing strut, and clung on desperately.

One of the medics looked down at me, checked his screen, and waved his companion to pick me up. Strong hands reached down and hauled me into the 'copter. I could hear some loud smashes from my apartment, even over the engines. I looked over to the pilot. "Out of here, NOW!"

The thing came to the remains of the window and leapt, but we were moving by then, and it fell short. I watched it fall to the street, landing heavily. It stood up and watched, seemingly impassive, as we sped off. I had to pay a 350c fine for misuse of emergency call-out facilities, but it was worth every credit.

Worthy prey, the kill will taste so much sweeter when it comes.

The next day, I found myself some decent accommodation and replaced my stolen kit. I took a flat at the top of a good high rise near to Central, with an excellent view of the wonders of the World of Progress. It cost a small fortune of

course, but came with door guards, security systems, reinforced doors and good neighbours.

A month of games passed almost without notice. I didn't see anything of the Ghost, and was starting to hope that maybe it had gone for someone else. I was getting regular bookings and a fair amount of publicity - the Circuit was finally beginning to live up to its reputation. I was brought back down with a crunch when I got home one evening to find a hand-delivered letter sitting on the table in the front room. It was even shorter than Johnny's note had been, and the paper - and handwriting - were a lot worse, too.

Found you.

I dropped the letter to the table and looked around wildly, snarling, before I realised that there was no-one around and I was just a lone prat snarling at a letter.

I grabbed the phone and dialled Johnny. He answered as immediately as ever.

"Todd."

"Johnny, I think the ghost just came back."

"Interesting. Give me an hour." He hung up. Fifty-nine minutes and seventeen seconds later (I know, I counted every one of them), the phone rang. I snatched it up from where I'd been staring at it.

"Todd."

"Hello Johnny."

"I'm scheduled to appear in an off-world match soon, a high profile event. I can cancel and send you in my place. It's on a jungle world. It's a perfect trap to catch this thing in; it won't be able to resist. We'll be able to monitor arrivals and departures from the zone, and we can hunt it down from there. You should be safe enough where you are until then."

"Sounds good. Where and when?"

"Varish, four days. Get your stuff in order."

Johnny's sponsors were rather unimpressed by his late withdrawal, but he assured them that I could very well be the next big thing, which mollified them slightly. I'd never been off world before, so I was looking forward to the fight as an interesting experience.

As the shuttle accelerated out of the atmosphere, I found myself revising my definition of interesting. We didn't get to see the outside of the foldship, which I'm grateful for; the little cabin they showed me to was bad enough, all strange whorls and curves, and made out of something that looked like wet black rubber but felt like flaking skin. The fold itself lasted an instant, but that moment felt like forever, falling

down and down into a vile abyss of twisted pain. I made a silent mental note not to travel by fold again, if possible.

When I made planetfall, my first impression was the silence. On Mort, the rain is a constant thing. You don't really notice it. Here, there was no rain drumming on the windows or splashing into puddles, no roar of traffic, no murmuring crowds or vid babble, nothing but sun beating down over the forest. That was when the smell hit me... Or rather, the lack of smell. Clean air. I'd heard about it, but none of the stories prepare you. It's like breathing gold. It made the fold worthwhile.

A discreet cough behind me snapped me out of it. I turned round to face the contest organiser, a small, wizened woman. Mrs Casey, if my memory served me right.

"Mr Argus," she said, offering her hand.

"Madam Organiser," I replied politely. I shook her hand. It had the strength and texture of a dead fish. Perfect.

"Mr Automatic has given us instructions on relaying information to you regarding the creature he is seeking to flush out. We will relay this to you via your headset, as agreed."

I nodded. "Thank you, Ma'am."

She smiled nastily. "There is no need for thanks. This arrangement is costing Mr. Automatic substantially. Now, if you would be so kind as to just join the other combatants, we will begin the briefing shortly."

As I entered the briefing room, sixteen pairs of eyes (and two sets of whatever it is that Xenos have) turned to focus on me. I looked around the room, nodding my head respectfully to the assembled talent. There were several Mort names there, including the Bushmaster, Tachi the Reaver, a sealed steel box labelled "Screech" - can I never get away from that bloody thing? - Preacher and Ultra Violet eyeing each other warily from across the room, and over in the corner, a slight, innocent-looking young woman who I knew to be Mags, infinitely more dangerous than she appears. The others were from various other leagues, including a couple from New Paris and three from Artery. I didn't know them, but chances were that they'd be more familiar with the terrain than we would.

Mrs. Casey came into the room and cleared her throat again. Everyone turned to face her. No matter what your prejudices in this game, work is work. She lifted a sheaf of papers and began reading from it, droning from the first syllable.

"Welcome, great champions of the contract circuit, to Varish. It is our great privilege to..."

"What are we killing and where?" asked Tachi loudly, cutting through the speech.

REPUTATIONS

"Well... ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, what a shameful display of muscle and brawn triumphing over wit and talent. We saw the lovely Silver Star fall to the pummelling of that repulsive and lacklustre giant, Hunchback. What can we say of his performance, except that it did the job? But of the beauty and athletic grace of the Silver Star, surely we must sing. Devoted viewers, we all saw her fall, yet we know that she will rise again into the night-time sky and look down upon us, shining through the clouds which the Hunchback and his like shroud us in. Silver Star, we worship you!"

Eddy Goya, commentator for the Circuit Channel.

Rep is the only true measure of a Killer's ability and status. This Skill may not be bought during character creation: it must be earned. As soon as you sign up with your first Agent, you attain Rank 1. This will cost one experience point, a prerequisite to joining.

Since Rep is a measure of your reputation, it is limited by your Charisma. This means that you must attempt to improve your image whenever possible, in order to look good for the media and the audience. This will help you raise both Charisma and, eventually, your Rep. As stated previously, ugly brutes who fight in boring ways simply do not stand a chance of making it big – there's no worthwhile coverage, the audiences dwindle away and the betting peters out. Now, take a flash young Ebon who's got a nasty way with stilettos and there will be enthusiastic crowds cheering her on, vid repeats late at night and creds speeding from hand to hand. Everybody's happy. The brute might beat the crap out of the shiny Ebon in the ring, but it's the Ebon who has the potential to go to the top of the Circuit.

USING REP IN THE GAME

For almost all purposes, Rep is ranked between 1 and 10. Ebons have a maximum Charisma of 11, but there aren't any rank 11 Killers around for them to fight. Only one being exceeds rank 10 Rep – the Old Man of the Circuit, The Spinner, and he's a Necanthrope.

To go up a ranking, you need to challenge, fight and beat a number of higher-ranked Killers equal to the rank you are trying to reach. You also need to have Charisma at least equal to the new rank, and you need to spend experience points equal to the new rank. In other words, you need to beat two opponents of Rep 2 or more, have a Charisma of at least 2, and spend 2 XP to go up to Rank 2. However, if you are Rep 9 and you are trying to make it to the top, you need to beat ten opponents of Rep 10, have 10

experience points available, and have a Charisma of at least 10 – a bit more tricky.

There is also the matter of maintaining your present ranking. To do this, you must fight a certain number of opponents of equal or lower Rep, or your lack of effort and obvious cowardice will immediately drop you to the level below. You need to accept at least as many challenges, in each month, as your current CK rank. Furthermore, if you're clearly outclassed in a rank, you drop a point of Rep again – if you lose three fights in a row, you drop a point of Rep.

You do not receive any experience points 'back' as a result of losing a rank. The points are gone. Also, if you are Rep 1 and you fail to fight at least one other newcomer in a month, then you are thrown out of the Circuit and, hopefully, never seen again.

Ranking challenge matches have to be one-on-one, but do not need to be to the death – in fact, they're usually either to first wound or to incapacitation/submission. They can take place in a Circuit arena, as a special challenge within a larger event, or even on the spot out on the street. Each month however, the Circuit fight controllers will offer you at least 3 times your Rep of challengers of equal or lower rank. You may not challenge downwards, only upwards or on an equal footing.

So, for example, if you are Rep 3, you need to fight at least three challengers each month to retain your rank, and you need to fight and beat at least four Contract Killers of Rep 4 or higher to move up (costing 4 experience and needing a Charisma of 4+). You will be offered fights with nine (3*3) Killers each month. If you lose three fights in a row, you will drop back to Rep 2.

Remember, you do not have to accept any particular challenge, and you may never challenge downwards. You can only accept challenges from those lower than or equal to you, although your Agent or Sponsor may well organise a special fight with someone of higher rank that you haven't chosen – all part of the joyful world of contracts.

The most obvious use of Rep is in the Contract Circuit itself, as you face your opponent(s) in the ring. This is where it becomes rather obvious why so few new Killers challenge Delia the Destroyer. In an official Contract Circuit fight (and never in any other circumstances whatsoever), the difference between the Killers' Reps is subtracted from the combat rolls made by the lower ranking Killer and added to those of the higher ranking Killer. If there are more than two combatants, then each modifier is worked out separately for each Killer. This reflects the incredible awe and fear that higher-ranking Contract Killers provoke in their inferiors. Here's an example to make things clearer:

Delia the Destroyer has Rep 10, Sour Blood has Rep 8, and Tig has Rep 5. If the three fought each other, Tig would be at -5 (5 - 10 = -5) against Delia and -3 (5 - 8 = -3) against Sour Blood. Sour Blood would be -2 (8 - 10 = -2) against Delia, but +3 (8 - 5 = +3)



against Tig. Finally, Delia the Destroyer would wipe the floor with Tig, having +5 ($10 - 5 = +5$), and against Sour Blood would be at +2 ($10 - 8 = +2$).

You can clearly see the effect of challenging a hero when you are a mere scraping on the arena floor. These modifiers only apply in



official Contract Circuit matches, so brawls in the Pit after a long day don't count. It has to have the hype, the tension, the audience, the vid screens and the smell of fear – assassins firing from an overhead gauss rail are not the same kind of thing.

"I was standing opposite Screech, watching it change shape and scream at me. I couldn't believe what I was doing. I mean, I wanted instant fame, but this was so scary. I think I wet myself. I know my knees were shaking. Who the hell did I think I was? I was going to die, I knew it was going to tear me apart. It just stared at me and screamed. Way too much, man. I threw up and just ran for my life. Screech won by default, but at least I lived. The next day it walked up to me and handed me a bag. When I looked inside, there was what I'd left behind me when I'd run. It'd got some janitor to scrape the mess off the canvas just so it could rub the fight in my face. That was too much of an insult, I mean you just don't take that in front of your friends, do you? So I grabbed a glass and broke the thing in it's face. Yeah, it screeched like hell that day!"

Anon. Interviewee

Wherever the fight takes place, no matter when or under what conditions, the Rep modifiers will come into play – as long as the fight is an official Circuit conflict, that is all that matters. This reflects the fact that no matter how dark the arena is, no matter how many drugs you pumped yourself with, no matter how much pep talk your trainer gave you, if you're facing a Contract Killer who is better, you know it. The crowd will cheer for the other Killer and not you, the commentators will be declaring how much this is going to hurt you, your own self-confidence will be squashed under the weight of media attention and public adoration going against you. That's not even considering that the Killers you're facing have already proven themselves more skilled than you on numerous occasions. To beat them, you're going to have to be lucky. If you get off lightly, maybe they'll only hurt you a little bit...

STAYING IN THE CIRCUIT

Fitness is a major factor affecting combat performance in the Circuit. If you are out of training then chances are you'll be beaten to a pulp by someone whose reflexes and stamina are just that bit better. You need every edge you can get in the arena, and Bookies and Agents make sure that you know it. It is highly recommended that you work out in a suitable gymnasium frequently.

As you may be aware, beginners cannot spend much time toning their puny muscles, particularly when compared to the real pros, who need to spend hours every day just keeping in trim. Novices just don't have the stamina. Those who have reached Rep 10 go to the gym to tone their muscles and keep their fitness at its incredible level, whereas a Rep 1 Killer has to be careful not to overdo it and strain unprepared flab.

A couple of sessions a week can eventually produce a body worth worshipping – it just takes time. You must work hard to reach a suitable level and continue to tick over at the correct pace in order to stay there. Too much eating, too little exercise and soon you will have slower reaction times and be cut to ribbons in the ring. Hence, there are certain minimum requirements – to maintain your Rep, you must work out for at least two hours a week for every Rank you possess. If you fail to do so, your Rep (and your fitness) will slide. Your agent will sort out gym facilities for you.

This means that a beginning Rep 1 Killer visits the gym for two hours a week and is just about good enough to continue. Johnny Automatic (Rep 10) has to train for at least twenty hours to keep himself at his rather grizzled peak of physical perfection.

Of course, you may train a lot harder if you want, but it won't help you much, as you have to take these things gradually. Relax, or you'll break something. When you begin to work out as a Killer, you automatically gain a Good Body rank equal to your Rep rank. If you already possess ranks of Good Body, then ignore it until your Rep is pushed up above your own Good Body. As far as losing ranks go, if you began the game with Good Body rank 3 and dropped from Rep 3 to Rep 2, you still lost a Good Body rank. Sorry!

Thus, a Rep 5 Killer must work at least ten hours a week in a gym to maintain the kind of fitness needed to survive against the rest, and has a Good Body Rank of 5 to reflect the work she has already put in. If she was to neglect the work-outs and exercise and do less than ten hours a week, she would become Rep 4 and Good Body Rank 4.



BEHIND THE SCENES

Every self-respecting Killer puts a lot of time and effort into her image and profile. You may not see it on the cameras, but getting ready for battle – or a night on the town – is as much to do with stunning outfits, careful makeup and impressive equipment as it is about weapons training or pumping iron in the gym. In this section, we're going to take you on a little tour of the effort that goes into making sure a Killer's tools of the trade are up to the job. Discerning Operatives doing well for themselves would be well advised to make use of some of these services themselves.

VELKRA™ - PROTECTION WITH STYLE FROM MAL

Following their success with the Shock Armour and the CAF Padquill Flak Vest, MAL have released a new line of personal protection solutions for 905SD to rival the success of Power Projects. However, rather than targeting the same market as PP, they are trying to forge a whole new market area, and first reports indicate that they're taking the World of Progress by storm. For years now, Contract Killers and Operatives have had to make the choice between looking stylish or having adequate protection in the line of duty. Now, thanks to an innovative new material from MAL, they can have both. Created accidentally during a mishap on the Padquill range, MAL have uncovered a new fibrous weave with astonishingly advanced energy absorption qualities. In layman's terms, this means it offers far better protection than the dense padding used in the Padquill range. It also resists knife cuts and other attacks designed to puncture. More importantly, MAL's senior technical team have established a way to combine this material with other fabrics, retaining its protective qualities whilst allowing more conventional fashion designs to be created.

The material's properties were first discovered by scientist Stephen Frost following his tests on improving the Padquill range. A junior researcher, he spent some time looking into the accidental materials properties in his lunchbreaks. Once he realised the potential, he strongly pushed his idea that the new material could be used for high fashion clothing with added protection.

"I saw the potential just after ripping one of my favourite shirts. I had thought about saving up for a Solutionwear™ replacement that could have healed itself, but then I thought how much better it would be if the shirt was rip proof in the first place. Discovering this material just days later was obviously a sign from Mr Slayer."

Frost's initial attempts at persuading his superiors to venture into the fashion industry were ignored until he took it upon himself to study fashion and design his own range of clothing using the material, which he dubbed Velkra™. The only downside of the clothing was that the Velkra™ material felt rough on the skin, and had to be worn over a more conventional fabric. However, after further research it was discovered that the weave could be combined with other materials to allow a more comfortable range of clothing.

At this point Frost's superiors agreed that a new line of armoured clothing could be a success, and promoted Frost to head up the new Velkra™ range of armoured clothing for MAL. Right from the beginning, Frost had ideas of using some of the top designers from across the World of Progress.

"I persuaded New Parisian designer Anne Hayes – along with Siobhan Lambert – to help me on some of the initial designs. Then when these were ready, I contacted a number of fashion houses and eventually persuaded Sigerson and Arducci to incorporate Velkra™ into their current fashion range. They were already working on their own ideas of armoured clothing, and were able to combine those ideas with Velkra™ to provide unparalleled protection. I also collaborated with Solutionwear™, after showing them that we could literally grow their Animattire™ tissue through a Velkra™ mesh. The results were incredible."

Although expensive to manufacture, the new Velkra™ designs are worth every credit. They offer excellent protection to the professionals who invest in them – whether they are Corporates, Contract Killers, Media Personalities or Operatives – yet still provide top styles. In all walks of life, people can be safe knowing that they have that stylish protection on the streets of Mort.

The introductory-level line of Velkra™ clothing is based on those initial designs created by Stephen Frost. Dubbed TechWear™, this fashion range is designed to be practical and yet affordable. The energy behind this range comes from the core idiom of strong, heavy-duty work clothes that still look good as seasonal fashions change. Staying with the technical look, this clothing has an great number of pockets, loops and storage areas to hold everything from SCL cards to a Pacifier Baton safely and securely. Mainly designed in winter and autumn colours, the clothing has the added advantage that it won't stick out too much in Downtown – very important for Operatives who spend a lot of time there. It does however offer a level of protection that is greatly comforting in such hostile territories.

To increase the life span of your clothing, areas that are likely to wear quickly are reinforced, such as the elbows and knees. These are either designed to blend in subtly with the design, or are patched in contrasting colours for people who like to stand out. As well as long sleeved jumpers, heavy shirts, combat trousers, denims and stylish overalls, this range also offers armoured work boots and a range of head gear from beanies and caps to work

helmets designed to protect the skull and keep the head warm. For those who like to remain dry, there are also several different styles of trench coats and leather jackets guaranteed to keep the rain away from you.

Sigerson have always been influenced by trendy movements in gang cultures, and this year is no exception. Using the new Velkra™ weave, they have established SigersonStreet™ – a line of clothing that many seem certain to try to emulate in the following year. The main emphasis of the clothing seems to be hooded tops and baggy trousers, finished off with the trademark Sigerson boots. Mostly coloured in blacks and greys, these are accentuated by small patterns in primary colours. The symbols look as if they are in an arcane language, but whether they actually are only Sigerson and their new Ebon designer Mirage Johnson knows. The style of boots this years seems to follow that of the last few years, being large and heavy-looking without actually being clumsy. Many have detachable fixings for either a MAC Knife sheath or a BLA Derringer at the ankle, concealed by the trousers which hang over them.

As well as hooded tops, Sigerson has also designed several different long-sleeved t-shirts, mostly round-necked, and a range of different hats. All of these include the Velkra™ weave, and help to guarantee protection from head to toe. One new feature in the line not seen before are clip holders inside the front pouches of their hooded tops, allowing people to wear their clothing and still hold ammunition safely without the need of a bag or a MagHold belt. Most of their tops also come with an easily removable section at the wrists to allow for a drug injection system to show through. Unfortunately, the firm have removed their pager holders from the shoulders of their outfits, although their trousers still retain pockets large enough to hold a slug deck.

Eager for the high fashion industry to accept his ideas, Stephen Frost worked hard to persuade Karma's Solutionwear™ department to use his new Velkra™ material. Solutionwear™ had stolen the show at the Mort 900 SD Fashion Convention, and Frost knew that Velkra™ would need to make that kind of impact again with to be a real success. William Kennedy had his own ideas of how Solutionwear™ could develop armoured clothing however, and at first was not interested in using Velkra™ at all. It was only when Frost showed him some of the designs that Siobhan Lambert had created that Kennedy was finally persuaded. Working directly with Frost's original team, Kennedy determined that his Animattire™ tissue could be grown through a matrix of Velkra™, providing a material that was self cleaning, self repairing, armoured and still came in the four popular fragrances of other Animattire™ products. He was convinced.

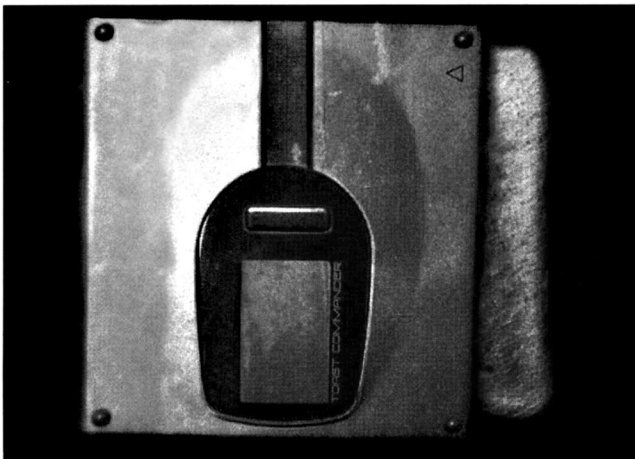
The Velkra™ Animattire™ range, known as KAV clothing – Karma Animattire™ and Velkra™ clothing – consists of clothes of all types, from business suits to sports wear, and casual outfits to lingerie. The most popular ranges at the moment represent a selection of smart but casual clothes. These include

PermiCrease™ trousers and large Stonk™ shoes with simple t-shirts, body suits, jumpers and jackets; especially the Polo ThermWear™. Also popular are their range of Operative suits, normally worn as matching jacket and trousers, with logo-covered T-shirt underneath. An alternative is shirt, tie and waistcoat with leather-feel jacket to give that 'smart-but-ready-for-anything' look.

Most of the clothes are in autumn colours, especially dark greens and browns with gun-bolt metal for zips, belts and fastenings. Also included in the accessory range is a selection of holsters and equipment pouches, designed to be unobtrusive and yet still match the overall appearance of the outfit. These allow for weapons up to Fen Gunhead size to be carried with ease. Most of the jackets come with an internal mobile phone pocket.

The finest Velkra™ designs have been created by Arducci, unsurprisingly. Drawing on the talents of Siobhan Lambert and Anne Hayes, Arducci worked with the original design team to push Frost's original ideas as far as they could, using the highest grades of Velkra™. These give more protection than any other material, and look absolutely impeccable. Arducci have released two product lines. The first is a range of clothes similar to KAV's smart-casual look. Strictly for those with credits to burn, these clothes ensure that any serious Contract Killer or successful Operative stands out amongst the crowd. Even though the material is slightly thicker than the KAV collaboration, it offers greater protection yet still provides a more stylish look; timeless elegance.

At first appearance the clothes seem to be a dark navy or black, but actually incorporate a dense mass of colour which only reveals itself under certain lights and heat. These form subtle patterns that move and swirl on their own accord. This effect has been designed cleverly so that most people will not even realise anything is different about the clothing – but they will still find themselves staring at the item, and the person who wears it, for hours on end. Arducci's HypnoWear™ is a perfect touch for people who like to be in the public eye.



Arducci have also released WorkSmart™, a range of highest-quality business suits and other office outfits for financiers, media personalities, Cloak agents and anyone else wanting to combine a smarter look with top protection. These suits are hand-made to order, and can feature many small variations, such as personalised initials, sponsorship logos and pockets for mobiles, derringers, handguns and Pocket Oysters. They can also be designed to allow for internal sword scabbards across the back, although thigh-long knife sheaths are also popular. To ensure that the range of clothing is available for all weathers, Arducci has released a large collection of three quarter length coats, macs and parka jackets with matching hats selections.

SYSTEM RULES

Each type of low-profile armour is bought as a full outfit of clothes with a pre-determined amount of protection, dependant on the make. Although all of the designs include Velkra™, the actual styles differ between the companies. This means that even though it is theoretically possible to mix and match ensembles from different outfits, the overall look would be horrendous, and incompatible areas of cover would compromise the protective qualities as well. ID is listed for each location of the outfit, but – just like conventional armour – only those locations that are covered by the outfit at the time of attack will actually offer protection.

TECHWEAR™:

Protection: PV 4, ID (head) 6, ID (torso) 10, ID (arms) 6, ID (legs) 7.

Cost: 550 credits per outfit.

Cost to repair: 15 credits per ID point.

SIGERSONSTREET™:

Protection: PV 5, ID (head) 6, ID (torso) 14, ID (arms) 8, ID (legs) 10.

Cost: 850 credits per outfit.

Cost to repair: 18 credits per ID point.

KAV CLOTHING:

Protection: PV 6, ID (head) 7, ID (torso) 20, ID (arms) 10, ID (legs) 13.

Cost: 1200 credits per outfit.

Cost to repair: As long as the damage taken does not take the ID below a third of its original amount, KAV clothing will automatically repair one point of ID per location in each twelve hour period. If the clothing is taken to below one third of its original ID, a replacement section of clothing must be bought costing 40 credits per point of ID.

ARDUCCI HYPNOWEAR™ AND WORKSMART™:

Protection: PV 7, ID (head) 7, ID (torso) 28, ID (arms) 12, ID (legs) 16.

Cost: 1700 credits per outfit.

Cost to repair: 24 credits per ID point.

EXOTIC WEAPONRY

The Contract Circuit sees a wide range of weaponry not normally found on the streets. In the search for any advantage, Killers experiment with all sorts of equipment from across the World of Progress. Killers should have difficulty in obtaining the weapons listed in this section – they may be rare or expensive, particularly when powered – and some might require the use of a special skill. This would have to be taught by a mentor proficient with the weapon, who could prove harder to track down than the weapon itself. Whatever happens, getting hold of exotic weaponry should be an achievement.

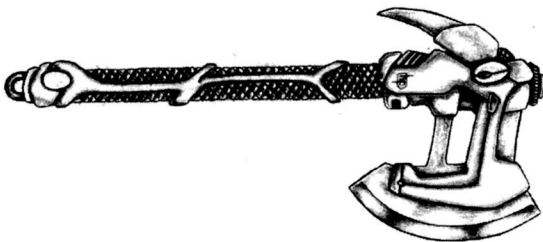
AXES

Skill: Axe. In a push, may use Club, 2-H at half skill for no more than 5 consecutive combat rounds. Historically designed for cutting and splitting wood, the axe is basically a sharp, heavy blade, roughly triangular in shape, fixed onto a handle. This crude design has been greatly modified over the years. All axes are now fully powered, with a 5000-hour life-span. Axes also inflict their user's damage bonus.

BATTLE AXE

A long, sharp curved blade on a one-metre handle, the battle axe customarily has a large spike projecting behind the blade. This provides extra weight for impact, and can also be used to impale opponents. The length of the blade means that penetration is relatively low, but tissue damage is extensive.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
6	2	4	40c



EMERGENCY FIRE AXE

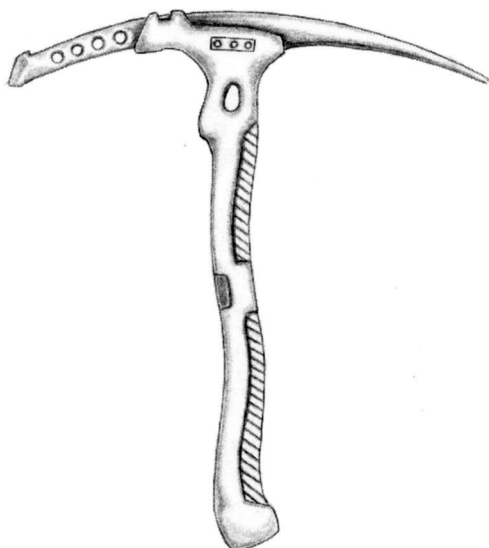
Featuring a shorter, slimmer blade than a battle axe and generally lacking a rear spike, the emergency fire axe is altogether lighter than its cousin. This is compensated for by a longer handle – the fire axe is 1.3m in length. This allows it to be swung at far greater speed than a battle axe and, combined with its reduced width, gives the fire axe a high penetration while maintaining impressive tissue damage capacity. Primarily designed for breaking through doors in case of emergency, emergency fire axes are readily available, but the skill to use them well is not. Note that the axe used by Fire Shivers is closer to a Battle Axe than it is to a standard Emergency Fire Axe.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
3	6	2	10c

PICK

Similar in concept to an axe, a pick is a long, curved spike set perpendicularly to a ceramic shaft. Mainly used as a tool, the pick is famed for its ability to punch through most things when swung at a good speed. Tissue damage is reduced by the narrowness of the spike, but the high penetration makes up for this, and some Killers have been known to use the weapon to deliver toxin loads. Powered picks may be obtained from most construction supply centres.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
2	8	1	3c



POLE ARMS

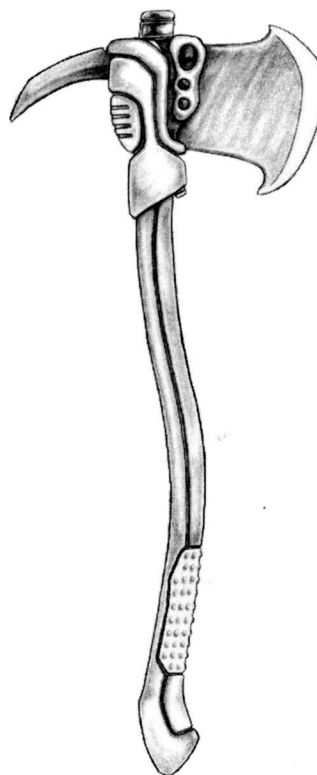
Skill: Pole-arm. Any bladed weapon over two metres in length, pole-arms are excellent for keeping an opponent at bay while still

doing damage to them. This class of weaponry includes spears and scythes, but is primarily of interest in the modern Circuit for an extremely rare modified revival of an archaic Frother weapon, the Lochaber axe. The danger with pole-arms of all types is that if the opponent can get closer than 1.5m, the weapon becomes largely useless (-10 to hit). Pole-arms also inflict their wielder's damage bonus.

LOCHABER AXE

A heavy, semi-circular blade sits at the top of a 2.4m ceramic pole. A wicked hook extends some 0.3m behind the pole, helping to counterbalance the weight of the blade. Because of its unwieldy nature, the Lochaber axe may only make a strike in every other one of its user's available phases. Comes fully-powered with a 4000-hour rechargeable pack.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
7	6	6	950c



FLAILS AND CHAINS

Skill: Flail. In a push, may use Flexible Weapon at half skill for no more than 5 consecutive combat rounds. Bewildering for the novice, this class of weapon essentially consists of chunks of metal connected to a ceramic handle by thick chain links. Flails are

extremely difficult to block successfully, as the chain tends to wrap past and parrying weapon. In combat, a flail weapon can only be defended against by a shield or by a fighter with at least Rank 4 in the flail skill, regardless of weapon used. All flail and chain weapons also inflict their user's damage bonus. Flail weapons are extremely rare.

MORNING STAR

A 16lbs steel ball connected to a 0.3m handle by a metre of chain, the morning star gets its name from the spikes that stick out from the ball. Each is some 15cm long and ends in a needle-sharp tip, and they cover the surface of the ball, radiating in all directions. The entire head is powered to vibrate at resonant frequencies, and has a rechargeable 5000-hour life span.

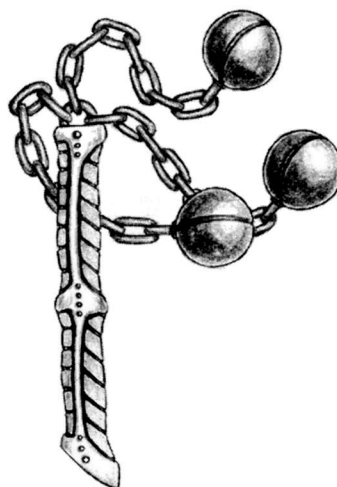
DMG	PEN	AD	COST
6	3	4	300c



FLAIL (2-HANDED)

The two-handed flail has three heads compared to the morning star's one, with shorter chain and a longer handle to improve control and force. The balls are unspiked, but are powered. The force generated by the three head striking in concert is quite astonishing, and the two-handed flail is an extremely dangerous weapon against an unarmoured opponent.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
7	1	6	350c



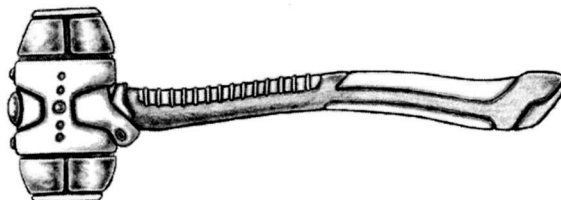
HAMMERS AND CLUBS

Skills: Club, 1H; Club, 2H. This is a very broad class of weapon. Hammers have been popular as cheap weapons since before the Conflict Wars; in essence, they are a heavy lump of hard metal at the end of a long ceramic shaft. Anything else is just refinement. Strength is a very important factor of Hammer and Club weaponry, and a good damage bonus can turn these weapons into mighty implements of destruction; all of them convey the wielder's damage bonus.

WARHAMMER (SKILL: CLUB, 2H)

Although the Warhammer is only 1.3m in length, the weight of the head—an 12kg chunk of steel—makes two-handed use vital for this weapon. Warhammers are violent-looking weapons with an aura of psychotic menace. They can be used to break down doors or walls as easily as to smash ribs and crush skulls. An oscillation unit set just below the head adds to the damage, and has a 5000-hour life span. Warhammers are difficult to obtain.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
5	2	5	400c



MACE (SKILL: CLUB, 1H)

Originally designed to destroy armour, a mace is a 1m ceramic shaft with a cylindrical metal head at the top. The head has eight thick spines protruding some 10cm along its length. The spines are spaced evenly, and are extremely damaging to armour of all

classes. Modern maces are powered, with a 5000-hour supply. Maces are extremely rare.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
4	2	10	300c



QUARTERSTAFF (SKILL: CLUB, 2H)

Although the quarterstaff does not do a great amount of damage, its value lies in its blinding speed. In the hands of an expert, the quarterstaff can be amazingly dangerous. In combat, the wielder may defend against all hand-to-hand attacks with half his skill in all phases, regardless of his DEX or of attacks made. This does not detract from the wielder's chance to strike, and he may then defensively add ranks of skill to a given phase's defence total as normal. The quarterstaff is an unpowered weapon, being just a 2m ceramic pole some 6cm in diameter. A good one can be quite tricky to obtain.

DMG	PEN	AD	ID	COST
2	0	1	30	15c



INDUSTRIAL WEAPONS

Skill: Industrial Weaponry. The use of tools and other pieces of large mechanical equipment as weapons of lethal force on the Circuit has been growing steadily more popular since BuzzSaw topped the rankings in 875SD. Industrial weapons have several advantages. They're easy to get hold of, not too complex to use aggressively, and they make the Killer look utterly psychotic.

CARSONMADE INDUSTRIAL NAILER 830C

Used originally in the construction field to punch spikes into metal surfaces, the 830C is a scaled down model designed for use on the Circuit. The size of the spike has been reduced slightly. The Nailer is essentially a high-powered version of construction devices used to imbed dense spikes into support beams for buildings. Given an extended range with its lighter spikes, the unit is considered too inaccurate to be used over distance. In hand to hand combat however, when it can be pressed against an opponent prior to triggering, the weapon is devastating as it easily punches into armour and can pin lighter opponents to surfaces.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
3	5	2	50c

GRISSOM INC. POWER SANDER

Useful for stripping away an opponent's armour away while he watches, this unit also makes a horrible mess once it bites through to the flesh. The sander also uses a chainsaw handgrip setup, but places a high-speed wheel along one side of the tool. The wheel is coated with iridium blades and has extensive handguards to prevent accidents. The edge of the wheel can be used to slash as well as the wheel surface eroding anything it comes into contact with.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
4	1	6	115c

HARDTEK ARC WELDER

Great for cutting metal surfaces or armour, the Arc Welder does require a heavy powerpack that can be vulnerable to attack. The welder is used to slice through metal and other construction materials using an ultra high temperature electrical discharge. Despite the fragility of the weapon – one successful called strike on the backpack disables it – it remains popular as it looks excellent on camera. The Arc Welder does not accrue any strength bonus.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
6	0	6	175c

HARDTEK HIGH SPEED CONCRETE SAW

Hardtek Manufacturing has also released a Killer-friendly version of their standard high speed portable saw. The weapon is equipped with heavy hand guards, face shield, and a massive circular blade, mounted at a slight angle at the front end of the weapon. It is unwieldy however, and attacks with it are made at a -4 penalty.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
5	6	3	215c

HI-VELOCITY 10.01 BOOM HAMMER

The H-V 10.01 Boom Hammer is a heavy hammer-like melee weapon that fits two 10-gauge shotgun slugs in a sliding compartment under the contact head. When the weapon strikes a hard surface, the shells go off, inflicting massive contact damage. The weapon's head breaks open for reloading, a process that takes 12 seconds.

DMG	PEN	AD	COST
11	2	6	175c

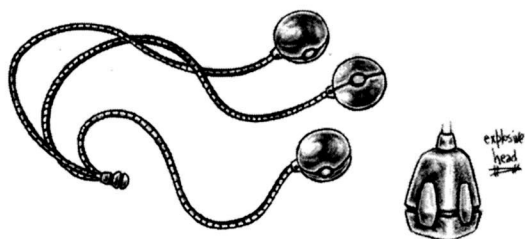
MISCELLANEOUS WEAPONRY

These remaining weapons are photogenic, but defy convenient categorisation. Many of them require a specific skill.

BOLAS

Skill: Add the user's abilities in Flexible Weapon and Throw together, and divide by three, rounding down to the lower of the two skills if appropriate. Alternatively, the user may learn bolas as a separate skill. The bolas itself is made up of three weighted heads at the end of lengths of chain, connected together at a central knot. The weapon is thrown at the target to entangle. See the entanglement rules later in this section for the full effects of a bolas hitting a target. Some modern bolas have frag grenade heads; if a hit is made with one of these, treat the result as if a grenade exploded actually on the appropriate bodily location of the target. These cost 60c more than a normal bolas, and may only be used once. The bolas does not benefit from a user's damage bonus. It is very difficult to find a weapons-quality bolas, and equally hard to learn to use one properly.

DMG	PEN	AD	STR	COST
2*	0*	0*	10	40c

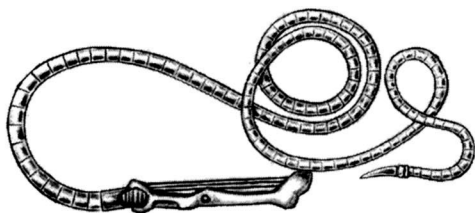


*Unless equipped with grenade heads, when all stats are as for grenade.

WHIP

Skill: Flexible Weapon. This weapon is a steel whip with a small oscillating tip. When wielded by an expert, a whip can peel flesh or armour away with lightning-fast deliberate strikes. The whip can also be used to entangle a target by making a called shot; see the rules later in this section. Whips make an extremely satisfying cracking noise when lashed correctly. Steel whips are easily obtainable.

DMG	PEN	AD	STR	COST
3	1	1	12	5c



NET

Skill: Flexible Weapon. A strong steel mesh with weights at the four corners, the net is primarily used to entangle opponents – see the entanglement rules below. For emergencies, it can also be rolled around a forearm and used as temporary armour for blocking, when it has the PV and ID shown below. Nets are most effective against a moving opponent; a target which was stationary at the time of impact will be able to escape after one round, regardless of strength. Properly weighted combat-grade nets are quite uncommon.

DMG	PEN	AD	PV	ID	STR
COST					
1	-1	0	5	20	15
50c					

ENTANGLEMENT RULES

A called shot must be made against a specific part of the target's body, such as head, arm, leg and so on. If the attack is successful, then the effects vary according to the target location. **Head:** Vision impaired. No visibility penalty (-5) applied to all skills until the target makes a successful compared strength roll. **Arm:** The arm may not be used until the entangling object is removed with a successful compared strength roll. **Torso:** If the target succeeds a compared strength roll, they break free. If they fail, they fall to the ground and are considered prone until making a successful roll. **Leg:** As torso, except that the victim makes their strength roll is at -3. **Weapon:** The called shot is made as if against an arm. If the target fails a compared strength roll, the weapon is snatched from the target's hand if possible. If fixed in place, the weapon is snared and unusable until the target makes a successful roll.

To make a compared strength roll, subtract the weapon's strength from the target's strength. Add the resulting number to a roll of 2D10, and if the total is 11 or more, the target has succeeded in breaking free. A compared strength roll may be made once in each phase that the target gets an action.

SERAPHIM PRODUCTS DEFENDER

Skill: Shield. Filling a unique niche in the Contract Circuit weapons field, Seraphim Products have concentrated on defensive items with the Defender and Defender II. The Defender is an unpowered shield with honed ceramite edges that can be used to gouge and slash opponents. A successful attack against a hand-to-hand opponent deals the listed damage and also allows the Killer to apply the shield's defensive values to any attack from that opponent in the same phase.

DMG	PEN	AD	PV	ID	COST
3	1	1	10	50	350c

SERAPHIM PRODUCTS DEFENDER II

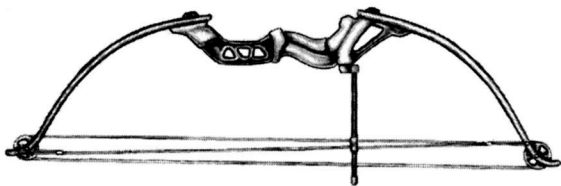
Skill: Shield. The Defender II improves on the unpowered model by adding powered blade surfaces to the outside edges of the shield. Dubbed the 'defensive chainaxe' by 3rd Eye, this weapon is gaining a following on the fringes of the Circuit. A successful attack against a hand-to-hand opponent deals the listed damage and also allows the Killer to apply the shield's defensive values to any attack from that opponent in the same phase.

DMG	PEN	AD	PV	ID	COST
3	4	3	10	50	900c

COMPOUND BOW

Skill: Archery. Featuring a recurved shaft made of hard carbon fibre, with stabiliser units and a filament string, the modern compound bow is more than suitable for use in the rain. Archers may aim their shots in a manner identical to that of rifle users. ROF is 1 every other phase of the user's until the Archery skill reaches 8, at which point ROF becomes 1. Archers need a STR of 9 to be able to fire a compound bow, but counterweighting is available. This costs 150c for each point of STR that the system has to compensate for. An archer with a strength of 6 would need to fit 3 points of counterweighting for example, costing 450c.

Compound bows are uncommon and expensive, and only one grade of arrow is readily available, as listed below. Arrows cost at least 20c each, making archery an expensive past-time. High explosive, cross-headed and fowling arrows are also available, but are extremely rare, and must be hand-made by master craftsmen. Maximum range of an arrow is absolute, and is not dependant on the strength of the bow. Fowling arrows are based on a historical design, and have a broad head with holes punched through it; the arrow makes an eerie buzzing noise in flight. Another historical design, cross-head arrows end in a sharp "+", rather than a point. This increases tissue damage, at the expense of range and penetration. High explosive arrows have a short maximum range because of the design of the head. Note that with the exception of fowling arrows, archery is almost silent. HE arrows are destroyed on impact, but there is a 50% chance per arrow that other types of ammunition will be reusable if they can be recovered.



Compound Bow:

OPT. RANGE	ROF	RCL	COST
100m *	2	1500c	

Standard Arrow:

DMG	PEN	AD	MAX RANGE	COST
4	6	1	200m	20c

HE Arrow:

DMG	PEN	AD	MAX RANGE	COST
14	3	12	40m	140c, sold to Rep 6 / SCL 5 or better

Cross-head Arrow:

DMG	PEN	AD	MAX RANGE	COST
8	2	8	90m	40c, sold to Rep 6 / SCL 5 or better

Fowling Arrow:

DMG	PEN	AD	MAX RANGE	COST
7	4	2	200m	35c, sold to Rep 6 / SCL 5 or better

MERCHANDISING

SLA's bottom line has always been to make money; and merchandising is where the money is made. The combined novelty goods turnover from the Contract Circuit puts even FEN's annual reports to shame, yet it nearly all comes in dribs and drabs, a few unis here and a few Credits there. When it was first launched, the SLA Industries Channel (SIC) changed the way that the citizens of Mort watched their daily violence and went on to set the patterns that the modern Circuit still follows. Instead of 'who died today?', the question on everybody's lips became 'how did my favourite do today?'. People wanted see their favourite Killers perform. Faces were being recognised, and the potential profit was enormous.

Once products were advertised on the backs of the Killers, the obvious next step was to put the Killers on the backs of products. It started simply – Paramount Pizza produced boxes displaying their Killer, "Pizza Boy". When sales rose sharply, they knew they had something; when the boxes were found decorating walls, it became obvious that it was not the pizza.

To the joy of the adoring fans and money men alike, the phenomenon snowballed. At first it was the obvious things – posters, badges, photos and screen shots of the Killers in action. Possession became a point of status. People with last month's Killer badge were nobodies. With the constant turnover of Contract Killers, the money kept rolling in. The range expanded: mugs, plates, clocks, toothbrushes, clothing. Companies realised

that putting a top Killer on products doubled demand, and thus price, at a negligible cost. It was money for nothing. Then, in 801SD, Phobos, a MAL sponsored Killer, started a fan club. For a few unis fans received a photo, welcome letter and regular updates. The photo featured Phobos standing proudly in his armour, the MAL logo emblazoned on his chest.

MAL saw it as a flagrant breach of their identity (the logo) and their property (him). They cancelled his contract and issued numerous yellow BPNs to retrieve the fan club merchandise. Confusion and panic spread. The uncompromising MAL response meant no one knew where they stood. Phobos' fans were enraged at having their photos "retrieved". To prevent further confusion, the franchise deal was born. It clearly stated how the Killer's identity could be used – and exactly what they got in return.

A franchised product's value is directly related to the Killer's reputation, with top names fetching ten times the plain item price. However, peer pressure to own the latest products is so strong that high price is little deterrent. The item itself also often seems irrelevant. In SD 823, to the amusement of the Killers, Spatula Empire signed a deal for a range of pallet knives featuring the current top 5 Killers on the Arena boards. When the entire line sold out in six days the laughing stopped and the range of products multiplied. Now, almost anything can be bought with a Killer on it.

For younger enthusiasts, Killer figures retail for 15u for a basic doll, with extra costumes and weapons starting from 2u, and full arena sets costing 50u. For those wanting "The 3D Effect In Your Waller", hologram stickers sell at 5u.

As "Every Child on Mort Wants to be a Contract Killer", the SLA Operatives Of Tomorrow (SOOT) Toy Company offers Contract Killer costumes, complete with replica weapons and "Stick-on Injuries for that Gorealistic(tm) Effect". Their racial diversity program means costumes now include stick-on mutated biogenetic quills, Xeno skullmasks and Shaktar braidpieces. Specific Killer costumes prices start at 20u, although basic generic sets are cheaper.

This wannabe craze is further fuelled through arcade machines. 'Beat-em-ups' allow multiple players to control top Contract Killers in popular arenas. Oyster versions retail for 75u. For 100u, the oyster 'covert roleplay' games require the player to solve clues to hunt down opponents – "Just Like The Real Thing". A further 25u buys upgrade pack Graphic Audio Overlays (GAOs). These provide big-name Killers, new opponents, arenas or puzzles. New GAO's hit the shops every week.

Even failures are not failures. The 25u Sewers and Serial Killers game died because fans preferred watching their heroes to moving models of them. Among collectors it can change hands for 300u. Badly phrased franchise deals, notably the Tachi v Sour Blood action set with its unlicensed logos, have seen products pulled



from shops, causing their collectible value to soar. In 841SD, Off Shore Ebons (OSE) signed a minor franchise deal with Killzone to include statistic cards with their sweets. Within six months the sweets had become an unnecessary expense. When Killzone Konnection magazine published a game using these cards, limited edition cards appeared and the range expanded. Packs of randomly selected game cards cost as little as 5 uni, with the top Killers and rarer cards selling on the black market for up to 500u. When the controversial Dark Night cards appeared, Cloak Division suspected subversion. OSE argued that evil 'opponents' should be represented. The death of OSE freed up many lucrative franchise deals and a wide range of games hit the market.

Not everything is child-friendly. Some products – most notably the wide range of sex aids – are definitely aimed at adult fans. To quote a recent launch brochure, "Karma sex replicas draw on cutting-edge Doppleganger Institute technology and are biogenetically designed to be an exact reproduction of the Killer. They are programmed with convincing level of semi-sentient conversation and a wide range of high-grade sexual skills, techniques and abilities. Higher models are taught certain catchphrases or signature moves linked to the Star." Killers try to pretend that they don't really care but then, with a starting price of 7500 credits for a basic model, few fans can afford the experience. The very first replica released – an Ultra Violet – sold for over 30,000 credits. The purchaser's identity remained secret, despite frenetic media searches, and now thousands of replicas have crawled out of the tanks. Collectors eagerly await Dark Lament's anticipated response.



DOODADS AND DOPE

A Target! Magazine special feature by Blayten Norturn

A strange thing happened to me the other day. My narcissistic and deranged editor came up to me and, to my astonishment, talked to me about work. I mean, I had no idea he even knew I worked for this publication. Anyway, I digress. "Blayten," he said, "we need drugs and toys, write something on the newest ones out today." So, here it is – the first in my new bi-monthly look at the latest advances electronic and narcotic.

There's nowhere better to start than the latest offering from Pharmics. As I'm sure you remember, this observer commented on the new partnership between Pharmacorp and Sunny Electronics six months ago, warning you to watch out for good things from them. Well, here's the first one – the Voice-Pro 6000. It's a voice activated drug injector, the first of its kind on the market. This little marvel fits into a slim-line pouch which can be worn under almost any suit of armour, and sports a pickup on a reasonably long cable. This needs to be within 30cm of the wearers mouth. The usual place to wear the unit is on the forearm, with the cable running up the arm to the shoulder. Specifically keyed at time of purchase to the purchasers' voice, this unit provides the ultimate in fast access drug injection together with the security of single user access.

Never one to be left out, Pharmics' bitter competitors Emulex have released the Emulex 20, a natty little voice synthesizer. Say, you don't think? No! Couldn't be... anyway the release, although coincident, is officially nothing to do with the Voice-Pro 6000, and all to do with undercover operations. The Emulex 20 will record and store the voice patterns of up to 20 individuals –Emulex 20, geddit? Anyway this little device fits into the palm of your hand, and from as little as 10 seconds of sampled recording can extrapolate and store the entire vocal patterning of an individual. Now, we can't say if it will cope with Shaktar vocal patterning – we were too scared to try – but it did simulate all the other races of the World of Progress successfully.

Getting a little bored with electronic trickery, I decided that it was time to move on, so I had a dig around in the pharmaceutical cupboard. I came up with some rather interesting finds, top of which have to be two new offerings from those boys at the Karma facility.

Barezark, a drug specifically designed for hand to hand combat, attaches itself to your adrenal gland and over stimulates it by a factor of 50. This periodical is not about to point out that this can't be healthy, but we do wonder how much usage of this drug the average body can withstand. We tested this using a couple of gangers from sector 483, and you should have seen that Barezark-enhanced kid rip into the other one. It was poetry.

I'll go out on a limb here and predict that within one month of the second offering from Karma becoming available to the

Operative community, every human Op will have a dose in their kit somewhere. MetaBoost is a drug offering short-term Stormer regeneration specifically to Humans only. It works by boosting the natural healing capacity of the body whilst also speeding up the metabolism of the user. Watching it in action is truly amazing, we actually watched the damaged ganger's wounds close up.

Little is known about the next drug company, GBB, save that they are a new start-up subsidiary of MKB. Their first offering onto the drug market would, at first glance, seem to have little use on the CK circuit, but on closer inspection I'm sure you'll agree they're decidedly innovative. NiteLite boosts the reception on the rods in the back of your eye and forces the pupil to dilate, effectively giving the user electronics-free night vision. We tested this one on ourselves and can honestly say it's great. Duration is a little short, on the order of about 10 minutes, and you don't want to be caught in a bright light while you're on it, but what the hell.

The other new GBB product is Vox-Plus. This increases the volume of a person's natural voice to the level that electronics are not necessary to boom a message out to a crowd. A whisper becomes as audible as if the person was talking normally and can be heard at 3 meters; when speaking normally, the user's voice can be heard at 25 meters. If you're shouting, you can be clearly heard at a massive 130 meters. Incredible, and you look a lot cooler without that megaphone.

That's all from me this month folks, but watch out for the next instalment in two months time, assuming my editor doesn't change his mind again.

GAME MECHANICS

Voice-Pro 6000: Injections take no actions and may be combined with physical actions. It holds 10 doses which can be triggered through the use of 10 individual key phrases. A key phrase may trigger a combination of injections, so use can become quite sophisticated. Cost: 150c

Emulex 20: With 10 seconds of recorded sample, the Emulex 20 can accurately duplicate an individual's voice on a 2D10 roll of 11+. For every extra 5 seconds of different sampled material after that there is a bonus of +1. Cost: 450c

BAREZARK

Game Effects: +2 Pen, +4 Dam, -4 PV, no Cool rolls, Duration 1 Hour.

Addiction: -1 PHYS per 2 doses

Detox Effects: -1 STR, -1 DEX, -2 PHYS, -2 Hits permanent

Addiction: 4 per day

Cost: 20cr per dose

METABOOST

Game Effects: Gain Stormer regeneration, duration 10 Minutes.

Addiction: -1 PHYS per 2 doses

Detox Effects: -1 STR, -1 PHYS, -2 Hits permanent

Addiction: 10 per day

Cost: 25cr per dose

NITELITE

Game Effects: Can see as if wearing Night vision goggles – limited vision is possible in full darkness, but bright lights will blind user completely for 4 rounds, with some vision restoring itself over the next 4 rounds, a penalty to all actions of -8 decreasing by one per round to a minimum penalty of -4 while the drug is still in effect.

Addiction: -1 PHYS per 25 doses

Detox Effects: -1 CONC permanent

Addiction: 1 per day

Cost: 10cr per dose

VOX-PLUS

Game Effects: Boosts natural volume of voice as though user is using a megaphone.

Addiction: -1 PHYS per 30 doses

Detox Effects: -2 to any voice based persuasion rolls permanent

Addiction: 2 per day

Cost: 10cr per dose

WEAPON CUSTOMISATION

A Contract Killer's weapons and armour need to be lethally effective, but they also need to be as impressive and distinct as the Killer himself. There are plenty of things that you can do to make your equipment stand out, from changing colour or texture to adding specialised features or even special effects. No Killer of any worth would ever be caught dead owning a boring off-the-shelf weapon. Designer weaponry is better still, but also a lot more expensive.

The following guidelines describe the various customisation options that are available for SLA weapons. There are four general categories of modifications that are available – Performance, Configuration, Appearance, and Armour-only upgrades. Customisations can be added on one by one or all at the same time, and can be removed, changed, tweaked around and otherwise messed with, so long as the Killer is happy to pay for the work to be done. A weapon can have a number of different modifications based upon its size; the bigger it is, the more space that the weaponsmiths have to work with. Obviously, no weapon

can have the same modification applied more than once. Anyone with the money can get a weapon customised.

Size	Example	Max Options
Small	MAC Knife, Nunchaku, Mutilator Fist	1 slot
Medium	Pacifier Baton, Power Disk	2 slots
Large	Chainaxe, Battle Axe, Flick Scythe	3 slots

PERFORMANCE

These are the customisation options that alter the performance of melee weapons in combat. Each entry describes the effect of the option, and the cost for having it applied. Firearms may not carry any performance upgrades.

Upgrade	Effect	Cost
Upgrade Cutting Surface, unpowered weapon	+1 PEN	80c

Replaces or enhances the existing cutting surface of the weapon to provide a harder and sharper edge.

Advanced Cutting Surface, unpowered weapon	+2 PEN	600c
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Replaces or enhances the existing cutting surface of the weapon to provide a truly razor-sharp edge.

Upgrade Cutting Surface, powered weapons	+1 PEN	125c
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This replaces the existing cutting surface with a harder, sharper blade facing. In the case of a Chainaxe, the weapon is reconfigured for a heavier chain with armor piercing characteristics.

Shred-a-lot blade configuration	-1 PEN, +1 AD, +2 DAM	600c
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The Shred-a-lot configuration alters the striking edge to inflict more damage on soft targets at the cost of a reduced PEN. In the case of Chainaxes and unpowered weapon this is a simple blade replacement, but installation on an oscillating weapon (Mutilator Fist, Power Claymore) is a more involved and costs an additional +50cr.

Mauler option	+2 PEN, +1 AD, +2 DAM, -1 Hit	1000c
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The Mauler option is an extensive reengineering project that adds a second motor, reinforced frame, and a second blade mounted parallel to the original. The two blades spin in opposite directions to provide unparalleled shredding ability of most opponents. Unfortunately, the weapon is far more cumbersome, and a bit unbalanced, giving a -1 to Hit.

Accelerated Oscillation	+1 PEN, +1 AD, +1 DAM	700c
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This option is for oscillating weapons only. Offering a higher-powered motor, increased shock absorption, and a larger power supply, this option accelerates the striking surface of the weapon by as much as 25%. The result is a truly devastating, albeit heavier, weapon.

Chopper blade option	+1 PEN, +1 AD	200c
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This option outfits a moving or oscillating blade with a fixed chopping edge that can be stopped to hack flesh and armor with greater ease.

Render	-4 PEN, -1 AD, +3 DAM	400c
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Originally designed for unpowered weapons, this option is now available for all bladed weapons. Instead of a solid striking edge, the blade is replaced with a serrated or jagged edge designed to rend flesh instead of tearing armor.

Masher	-1 PEN, +7 AD, -1 DAM	200c
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By increasing the weight of the object and adding certain fragmentary sub-spikes and texture features, the hand weapon can be made far more damaging to armour. The payoff is a small reduction in overall combat efficiency.

Screamer	Distracts opponents	1200c
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For oscillating weapons only, this upgrade adds a small grating unit to the side of the oscillation unit. When the weapon powers up, it emits a loud, uniquely jarring shriek as the grater grinds against the oscillator. Opponents must succeed a CONC roll each round or suffer a -1 penalty to their attacks in that round.

Stunner	Incapacitates opponents	2000c
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For oscillating weapons only, the stunner upgrade matches the oscillatory frequency of the weapon to that of the central nervous system. When an attack on an opponent beds deeply into the target's body – doing 5 or more points of damage – the shock of the oscillatory frequency can cause temporary unconsciousness, and a successful PHYS roll at -8 is required to overcome the effect.

CONFIGURATION

These options change the support elements of a weapon, adding enhancements that are not combat-critical. They are available for both melee and ballistic weapons.

Upgraded Power source	+20% power life	100c
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This configuration option replaces the existing power source with one of increased size, permitting longer periods of action without a need for recharge.

Quick Change Power Source	Speed reload	200c
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BEHIND THE SCENES

The Quick Change Power Source uses a removable battery for power instead of a standard large capacity permanent version. It can be changed very quickly in a way similar to a magazine and has a life span equal to 50% of a standard power source.

Advanced Construction +1 Hit, final x 3
Reduces Mass by 10%

Advanced Construction replaces the frame of a weapon with a higher tech ergonomic alternative in order to increased durability and strength. It is extremely expensive, tripling the cost of the weapon after all other costs have been taken into account.

Armoured handgrips/guards	Protects hands	85c
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This option replaces the standard grips on a weapon with armoured hand guards and reinforced ceramic grips, imparting an armour value of +5 PV / +10 ID to the hands only.

Oscillation +I PEN, 200c
+I DAM, -I Hit, +I RCL

This option adds limited oscillation to the striking surface of an existing weapon. Weapons with moving or grinding striking surfaces (such as a Chainaxe) cannot receive this option.

Armour plating +1 PV / +2 ID, 100c
+ 5% mass

Armor plating can be added to most weapons to provide resistance against incidental damage.

Multi-calibre	Permits	1000c
	different ammo types	

This option enables a firearm to be configured for a variety of ammo calibres by replacing selective sections of the weapon with easily removable parts. Once set, changing calibre takes ten minutes.

Bullpup Conversion Shortens 800c
weapon by 25%

This option converts a standard rifle to bullpup configuration, placing the magazine and action behind the trigger to reduce length.

Weapon mount

Locks two weapons together

200c

This option mounts a second weapon (usually under-slung) on the primary weapon. Originally designed for firearms, the option can incorporate melee and ballistic weapons into the same package.

APPEARANCE

The following options are cosmetic in nature and have little effect on the weapon stats. As they do not interfere with the internal mechanics of the equipment, they do not take up a slot.

Lamp mount	Adds lamp	30c
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Adds a fixed lamp mount to the side of the weapon. If desired, the lamp can be a UV or IR spotlight.

GFX Gore-effect edges	Glow edge, sparks, etc	100c
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The GFX upgrade adds one of a range of special effects to a weapon in combat. Popular features include the 'Spark-shower' coating that fills the area with sparks when metal is struck, and the 'Edgelight' that makes either the edges of a blade or the whole weapon glow a pre-selected colour with use of a fluorescent coating and subtle mounting lamp. There are many other options, including the Gorematic that causes a large spray of blood to be forced from a wound when the weapon hits (compressed air forces the blood up but does no extra damage), and the Speaker Unit that can trigger specific sound effects at pre-programmed times. These features is also available for armour.

Custom Detailing	Improves appearance	40c
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This option provides an impressive paint and detail job for the surface of a weapon. This service is virtually a requirement for a successful Contract Killer and will greatly impact their on-camera image.

Custom Surface	Improves appearance	60c
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A variation on Custom Detailing, this alters the surface of the item to look like a textured material. This could make a Slamhammer look like lizard skin or a flick scythe appear to be made of wood.

Gore-Shield	No stick surface	45c
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The Gore-Shield option protects and preserves any custom detail work on a weapon and allows substances such as blood or mud to be easily wiped off.

Scuff-Not Surface Treatment	Damage resistance	35c
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The Scuff-Not Surface Treatment prevents damage to the custom surface of a weapon by encasing it in a durable clear laminate. Each treatment has a six-month warranty for normal use.

ARMOUR-ONLY UPGRADES

Armour of mixed types can be combined to form designer armour using the following pricing: 10c/pt of PV and 5c/pt of ID.

Protection / ID values and costs for the entire suit are cumulative per area that is to be armoured. If multiple layers of armour are worn, only the highest PV or ID is used. Note that armour with PV of 5 is considered “soft” or flexible armour, and (with the exceptions of interdermalised Deathsuits and Velkra outfits) any armoured location with a PV and ID that total over 10 is not concealable. As with weapons customisations, no option may be chosen more than once, and neither Deathsuits nor Velkra outfits may be modified at all – Deathsuits won’t permit it, and Velkra lacks the necessary rigid structure.

Personal Fit	Improves comfort	50c
Adjusts and remolds the armor to fit a particular person, making it very uncomfortable or impossible for others to wear.		
Custom Detailing	Improves appearance	75c
An impressive paint and detail job for armour is virtually a requirement for a successful Contract Killer. Sponsors ensure that their logos are applied free of charge.		
Custom Surface	Improves appearance	100c
A variation of Custom Detailing, this alters the armour surface of the item to look like a textured material. This could make the armour appear like a sheet of flame, scales, or even provide moving video (+250c extra).		
Gore-Shield	No stick surface	65c
The Gore-Shield option protects and preserves the surface and allows substances such as blood or mud to be easily wiped away.		
Scuff-Not Surface Treatment	Damage resistance	60c
The Scuff-Not Surface Treatment prevents damage to the custom surface of armour by encasing it in a durable clear laminate. Each treatment has a two-month warranty for normal use.		
Weapon mount	Allows a weapon to be mounted	50c
This option adds a mounting point to the armour, suitable for either non-oscillating melee weapons or firearms.		
Lamp mount	Adds lamp	30c
Adds a fixed lamp mount to the armour. If desired, the lamp can be a UV or IR spotlight.		
Increased Protection	+1 PV (all locations)	500c
Increased Durability	+10 ID (all locations)	350c
These options are applied to an existing suit of armour to improve its effectiveness.		
Improved Exoskeleton	+2 STR	700c
This feature replaces the reaction servos on powered armour with the latest models to offer a one-time strength bonus.		

REPAIR

The following options are requirements for any regularly used equipment. If a weapon has a custom blade (such as a Shred-a-Lot or Render option), the cost of replacement is much higher. Costs are cumulative.

General Maintenance, balancing, etc.	100c
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Chain Blade replacement, std	20c
Chain Blade replacement, upgraded blade	30c
Chain Blade replacement, Shredder	35c
Mauler configuration blade replacement	30c
Edged weapon, unpowered blade repair	30c
Edged weapon, unpowered blade repair - upgraded	30c
Oscillation surface repair and reconditioning	40c
Oscillating blade repair/replacement	60c
Blade Sharpening	30c
Dent/scratch removal	10c - 100c
Powerpack replacement	100c
Repair frame/grip damage	50c - 300c
Armour repair per ID point replaced in one location	10c

DESIGNER WEAPONRY

Customised equipment is all well and good, but a designer weapon is the mark of a true professional, and it out of the reach of starting Contract Killers. These prestigious items are designed by master weaponsmiths, working in design salons or as lone master craftsmen, as the signature weapon in a specific person's arsenal. These weapons are prohibitively expensive, but do include free personal customisation as a bonus. Sponsors may copyright an individual weapon design.

Even before since Blaze Vile asked GASH to build him a Chain-Axe with air-flow ducts so that it screamed when he swung it, back in 754 SD, having a weapon built by craftsmen to your own specifications has been a must for anyone wishing to be taken seriously. Aspiring Killers working to get their look spend millions of credits every year in Mort City alone.

There are as many manufacturers of designer weapons as there are Contract Killers, of course. High-tech salons where every aspect of your build and combat style is measured in finely tuned full-haptic reality overlay vie for trade with the master weaponsmiths of the Shaktar Craftsman cast, whose requirements for payment often go far beyond mere money – no craftsman will work for anyone without a Rep of 6 or more or an SCL of at least 5, and even salons won't accept commissions from complete newcomers and green Operatives. While everyone has an opinion as to the best place to have a custom weapon made and the best person to have it made by, no-one disputes that a designer weapon is one of the keys to success as a Contract Killer.

BUILDING A DESIGNER WEAPON

Creating a designer weapon for your character is a simple 4-step process as outlined below:

1. Describe the weapon you wish to create and choose a basic weapon to build from.
2. Add Personal Adjustment and Primary Enhancement

3. Add Secondary modifications

4. Calculate base cost then multiply by quality

The first phase is the most important. All serious designer weaponsmiths insist on an initial consultation process during which the basic weapon concept is fleshed out. The procedure varies immensely. A simple design salon may require just a few hours to discuss requirements and a down-payment, while a master craftsman could ask the Killer perform a number of tasks that craftsman feels are necessary for the Killer to prove his worth. Once a base weapon is selected, its characteristics can be found below – and remember, these base weapons are high-quality items, not inferior off-the-shelf base products:

Weapon	SIZE	DAM	PV	AD	Cost
Glove or Boot	S	0	0	0	2c
Glove or Boot, bladed	S	1	0	0	7c
Knife or Dirk	S	1	0	0	5c
Club or Hockey Stick	M	2	-1	0	2c
Sword (1H)	M	2	0	1	10c
Axe (1H)	M	2	0	2	12c
Hammer (2H)	L	3	-1	1	30c
Whip	M	3	1	1	5c
Sword (2H)	L	4	0	0	15c
Axe (2H)	L	4	0	1	18c
Pole Arm (2H)	L	4	1	1	50c

PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT

Once the weapon has been selected, personal adjustment is calculated for the purchaser. Personal adjustment tailors a weapon's frame and balance for the fighting style, size, and strength of a specific person. This provides a +2 Hit bonus for the owner, a -5 for anyone else. It takes a week to acclimatise to your first personally adjusted weapon before the bonus becomes available. These weapons come to feel so natural that after the breaking-in period, the Killer suffers a -4 Hit penalty with all non-adjusted weapons. This feature is included as part of all Designer weaponry services, for which a nominal charge of 300c is allowed.

The next stage is Primary Enhancement. This represents the weapon's main method of delivering damage. Only one primary modification can be chosen, and certain weapons cannot be built with certain enhancements. Mutilator enhancement is incompatible with bladed weapons, for example.

VIBRO-ENHANCEMENT

Suitable only for bladed weapons, vibro-enhancement is the primary enhancement used for swords, knives and axes. Commercial Vibro-Enhancement is a long established process, though use of standard vibro-units makes some weapons inefficient. Designer weapons have their vibro-units specifically built to take maximum advantage of the properties of the weapon

and so are often more effective. All vibro-units have a 10,000 hour power pack.

DAM	PEN	AD	Cost
+2	+4	+3	220c

JOLT ENHANCEMENT

Developed by Shaktar technicians and recently applied to commercial weaponry, Jolt enhancement can be used with any sort of weapon. Jolt enhancement does not add to the damage, PEN or AD of the weapon, it simply makes it capable of delivering a powerful charge from the capacitors stored in the handle. This charge immobilises powersuits for 2 minutes (40 rounds) with no save, stuns non-powered armour wearers for 30 seconds (10 rounds) if a save of PHYS-20 is failed, and stuns unarmoured targets for 5 minutes (100 rounds) with no save. The Capacitors are good for 20 hits before needing to be recharged. Jolt enhancement costs 250c

MUTILATOR ENHANCEMENT

Made popular by ITB's mutilator glove, this enhancement is capable of creating horrendous wounds on its victims. Mutilator Enhancement is only suitable for blunt weapons. Commercial



mutilator units are always of the same type, but designer weapons are built with custom units for better effect.

DAM	PEN	AD	Cost
+5	+3	+4	335c

CHAIN ENHANCEMENT

In the eyes of the public, nothing says Killer like a powered chain weapon. Though not the most effective type of enhancement, this is certainly one of the most popular. Chain Enhancement is only effective for replacing the blade of a weapon. Rather than adding to the weapon's damage, Chain Enhancement carries its own damage code depending on the size of the weapon. This is due to the fact that larger weapons allow more the chain to be applied to the victim. Many weaponsmiths will not make chain enhanced weapons.

Size	DAM	PEN	AD	Cost
Small	4	3	2	270c
Medium	5	4	3	305c
Large	6	5	4	330c

MAC ENHANCEMENT

Available only from MAC custom weapon salons, MAC enhanced blades – and this enhancement can only be added to blades – may not be quite as damaging as their powered counterparts, but they do have the advantage of being completely silent. Vibro and Mutilator weapons emit a low hum. Chain weapons are less than subtle... Rumours that Shaktar weaponsmiths have devised a technique for adding Vibro-enhancement to MAC constructed weapons are unconfirmed, though if such weapons did exist the cost would doubtless be astronomical.

DAM	PEN	AD	Cost
+3	+1	+1	195c

ERGONOMIC ENHANCEMENT

The only primary modification available for ranged weapons, ergonomic enhancement fits a weapon to its wielder carefully and precisely, adding support structures designed to make use as comfortable and accurate as possible. This type of enhancement does not add to a weapon's damage.

RCL	RANGE	Cost
=1	x2	250c

CUSTOMISATION

Once the Primary enhancement has been decided, weapons designers will incorporate any standard customisations you require that are compatible with the weapon and primary enhancement. Because the weapon is being built from scratch, designer weapons have one more customisation slot than their off-the-shelf counterparts

FINISHING UP

The final stage is to pay for your new equipment and wait for it to be built. There is a lead time of two weeks for delivery of a salon-built designer weapon, and it may take up to two months for a craftsman to do the work. The cost depends on the quality of the finished work. Add up all the various costs associated with the base weapon, primary enhancement and customisation options, and then multiply it by the quality factor – and be prepared for the cost.

Quality	Extra bonus to hit*	Cost multiplier	Min. Requirements
Salon	0	x5	REP 2+, or SCL 8
Craftsman	+1	x10	REP 6+, or SCL 5

(*i.e. after the Personal Adjustment has been factored in)

EXAMPLES

Sanction's E2 Mutilator is a salon-built (x5, +0) weapon. A standard glove (2c, 0/0/0), it has Personal Adjustment (300c, +2 to hit) and Mutilator Enhancement (135c +5/+3/+4). Choosing to use just one of his two customisation slots (1 for the glove and 1 for being a designer weapon) to keep the costs down, Sanction chooses Chopper Blades (200c, +0/+1/+1), and also opts for custom detailing (45c) to fit in with his overall media image. The base cost is 682c and the final stats are:

HIT	DAM	PEN	AD	Cost
+2	5*	4	5*	3,410c

The Bond's sword, Rt'bs'rd or "Scythe of the Righteous" is one of the finest weapons that the Shaktar master smiths (x10, +1 to hit) have been able to devise. It started life as a two-handed Katana (15c, 4/0/0), with Personal Adjustment (300c, +2 to hit) and "advanced Vibro" enhancement, a technique only the Bond and the heads of the Shaktar clans are allowed to benefit from (415c, +5/+5/+4). The sword features advanced construction (x3, +1 to hit), accelerated oscillation (700c, +1/+1/+1), mauler blades (1000c, +2/+2/+1, -1 to hit) and a stunner unit (2000c, incapacitates). It has been textured to look as if it is carved from bleached bone (60c), an effect protected by Scuff-Not and Gore-Shield (125c). It moans as it is swung (GFX, 100c), and emits a soft, white light at all times (GFX, 100c). The High Lord Shahantian, who commissioned it for his Circuit champion, modestly admits that even before work had begun, the sword had cost him almost 14,500c (advanced construction multiplies the final base cost total by 3).

HIT	DAM	PEN	AD	Cost	Extras
+3	12*	8	6*	144,445c	stun unit

Web CoRd.

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TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As a Contract Killer, you are likely to find yourself thrown into all manner of unpleasant and unfamiliar environments. Most of the action on the Circuit takes place outside of the Uptown arenas, and even the most stubborn pit fighter is going to end up doing sponsor-led work away from the ringside crowds from time to time. It's part of the job. Bearing that in mind, the Directory is proud to feature a number of tactical essays this month, written by leading environmental experts, that describe the ins and outs of survival in some of the less common fighting environments.

SEWER FIGHTING

by David Gray, Advanced Carrien I&I Operative, SCL 7B

"Man, I hate fighting in the sewers. It doesn't matter how close you are to the surface, you are still on your own down there. If anything happens to you, no one will know, no one will find out. If you are lucky you might get fished out at a reclamation plant, but chances are the cannibals and Carrien will eat what's left of your body. And forget LAD. Even if the signal somehow manages to get through to the surface, there's no way the retrieval team is going to get to you in four minutes. Nope, every time I see the word sewer on a BPN card, I just pass it on to an eager SCL10 squad for half the money."

Jet Mansun (23), Male Human Operative, SCL 8B.

The sewer depths – the hunting grounds of lesser Carrien, scavengers, mutants and cannibals – are often regarded as the most dangerous place to fight in the Contract Circuit. After the hatch to the surface has been closed, there is no outside help available. Instead Killers must rely on the equipment they have bought in with them, and their own instincts. Those who are skilful and lucky make it out alive. Those who are less fortunate wind up making someone a tasty meal.

As soon as you leave the surface, you're in hostile territory. From ground-level, steel-runged ladders lead from the access hatches down 30 metres into a labyrinthine network of access tunnels. These oval tunnels are about three metres high and four metres across. Moss and lichen cover the walls and floors of these access tunnels, making them slippery to walk in, and slimy to the touch. The moss also scatters infrared and ultra-violet light, making it hard to see through any means other than normal torches and the emergency lighting. Light is provided by small solid-state lights set into the ceiling, floor-based strips of red emergency lighting and – where appropriate – the small luminescent green arrows



DWH 200

placed point up on the wall to mark exit points to the streets. These tunnels connect the different Department of Sanitation areas with factory discharge points and the actual sewer pipes. Theoretically, every hundred metres or so you'll come across a simple steel security door with a circular handle and an SCL 11 lock. These doors prevent widespread flooding – well, when they are kept closed, anyway. Access hatches often have security doors near them to help make sure that floodwaters have trouble reaching the surface. A little float gauge on either side of the door indicates whether the other side is full of water or not, although most of these have broken due to age.

The access tunnels can be blocked by rubble, or they can connect to each other, to major sewer-pipe trunks and directly to production facilities, but most commonly they lead into sump junctions with other tunnels. Before the Reclamation Drive of 773SD, these junctions were simple flood storage tanks. Now they are the critical nodal links in the tunnel network, spanning multiple levels and offering access to as many as fifty different tunnel areas. The smallest of them are one hundred metres deep and twenty-five metres wide, and the largest – often in Downtown, where flooding has been a perennial problem – as much as 1000 meters in diameter and fifty levels deep. Floors are usually brickwork, but some sumps are partly or fully flooded. Either way, be careful in these areas – if a deep sump junction connects to something's territory (and they all do, to be honest)

then anywhere in the sump will be liable to attack. Surface access tunnels may permit some small amount of external communication, but by the time you're in a sump or heading any lower than the top levels, you'll be completely out of touch with 3rd Eye control, remote camera handlers, and even station analysis. Not even finance chips can broadcast out of the sewers.

To permit easy travel between access tunnels and handy links to sewage pipes, factory zones, test and research areas, Deep Offices, and other such areas, the Department of Sanitation provides metal platforms and ladders throughout these junctions. There's always at least one platform ringing the sump circumference, and large junctions may have crosswalks that span the gap. Ladders lead directly up and down from the platforms to the various tunnels that open onto the sump. Although most of the metal is old and rusted, it is the only way to travel through the junctions, or from top to bottom. The sumps were provided with the same lighting as access tunnels, but it is rarely maintained, so as often as not the only light is the dim glow from the access tunnels. Finding the direct route from one place to another can be quite hard. Sounds also echo confusingly out of the depths, distorting in the sump. It can be very hard to identify which tunnel such sounds originate from. One word of caution – stay away from deep Downtown sumps all together. Bad things live in the depths, and use the ladders exactly as a spider uses webs – to locate and

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trap prey. Don't believe the press; there's far, far worse down in the deep sewers than just ex-war criminals, mutants and scavengers.

Some tunnels terminate in large security doors. These are traditionally iris-shaped to avoid blockage by debris, and almost always SCL-locked – anywhere from 10 for pumping stations down to 2 or 3 for Deep Offices. Clearance requirements will be displayed prominently on the door. Do not try to open a door above your SCL, and under no circumstances approach any door marked SCL 4 or less, even if you happen to have the clearance to enter. Most of these security doors are there to seal off automated factory complexes or Department of Sanitation machinery. These complexes occasionally include boosted transmitters, so if you need to get in touch with the surface, they are your best bet – your only bet, in fact.

Access tunnels are used to enter bona fide effluent pipes and Gauss tunnels. They have hatches in the floor that lead directly to sewage pipes running underneath. These sewer pipes differ in size, from little shit-pipes no more than a foot in diameter to old brick sector channels that can compare with the larger sump junction areas. There is little or no ambient lighting in these sewers, and paths often drop off into the sewage water. Junctions are structured similarly to the old sumps, but usually just on one level. Hatches may lead up or down a level via a short tunnel. Gas pockets can collect down here, and these are often flammable, caustic, oxygen-free or toxic. Doors and hatches newly built into sewer walls may lead directly to access tunnels or production areas, but they aren't very common. Stay away from the Gauss tracks, obviously – those things are very fast indeed, there's not much room down there. Effluent temperature may be quite near to body temperature, so don't rely on IR if you're tracking down there.

The main thing to remember when fighting in the sewers is to stay aware of your surroundings. In the dim light under the surface there are many shadows that could be hiding almost



anything. Make sure you have a basic understanding of how the sewers are designed, and you will be able to use the sewage pipes and junction stops to double back on pursuers travelling in access tunnels above. Lesser Carrien packs plan in three-dimensions, and may surround a target with a globe-shaped net before closing in from all directions. Fighting in the sewers quickly becomes a game of cat and mouse, the hunter often becoming the hunted. Flares and motion scanners can be useful for discovering foes, especially if connected to trip lines and hatches. Use terrain features as well. Stun grenades can be attached to doors left ajar, so that opening the door causes the grenade to detonate. Similarly, a MagHold can be used to attach an explosive grenade to the underside of a hatch, and a trembler switch will make sure that it detonate when someone walks over the hatch, dropping the person into the tunnel below.

Down here, visitors from the surface world are likely to come across the various beings who call the sewers home. These can range from small threats like Lesser Carrien and carnivorous pigs to serial killer cognates and DarkNight terrorist cells, all of whom will fight savagely to protect their territory. Even deadlier are the floods, which strike almost without warning. Sometimes these are nothing more than small whirlpools, sink vortexes and waterfalls that may well drown anyone who has fallen into the water. Real problems come when floodwaters race down the tunnels, filling previously empty pipes within a matter of seconds, and flushing whatever is in the pipe off to its final destination – which can mean a very long ride to the cannibal sectors. Don't worry about being dumped in CS1 though; if you're swept away by floodwaters, your armour will have been abraded off against the brickwork in about a minute, and you won't last more than a few seconds after that.

Occasionally, the sewers are used for staged contests. These generally take place in or around sump junctions. If the fight is planned in advance then extra lighting is often bought in so that

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the media can get better footage. It is also quite common for Operative squads to be hired to chase Carrien packs and carnivorous pigs into the area from the surrounding region. Operatives may also be hired to guard perimeter areas, ensuring that the Contract Killers remain in the specified combat zone and that nothing from outside can come in and attack the media teams.

INDUSTRIAL ZONES

by Wisper, Wraith Raider Scout Operative, SCL 6A

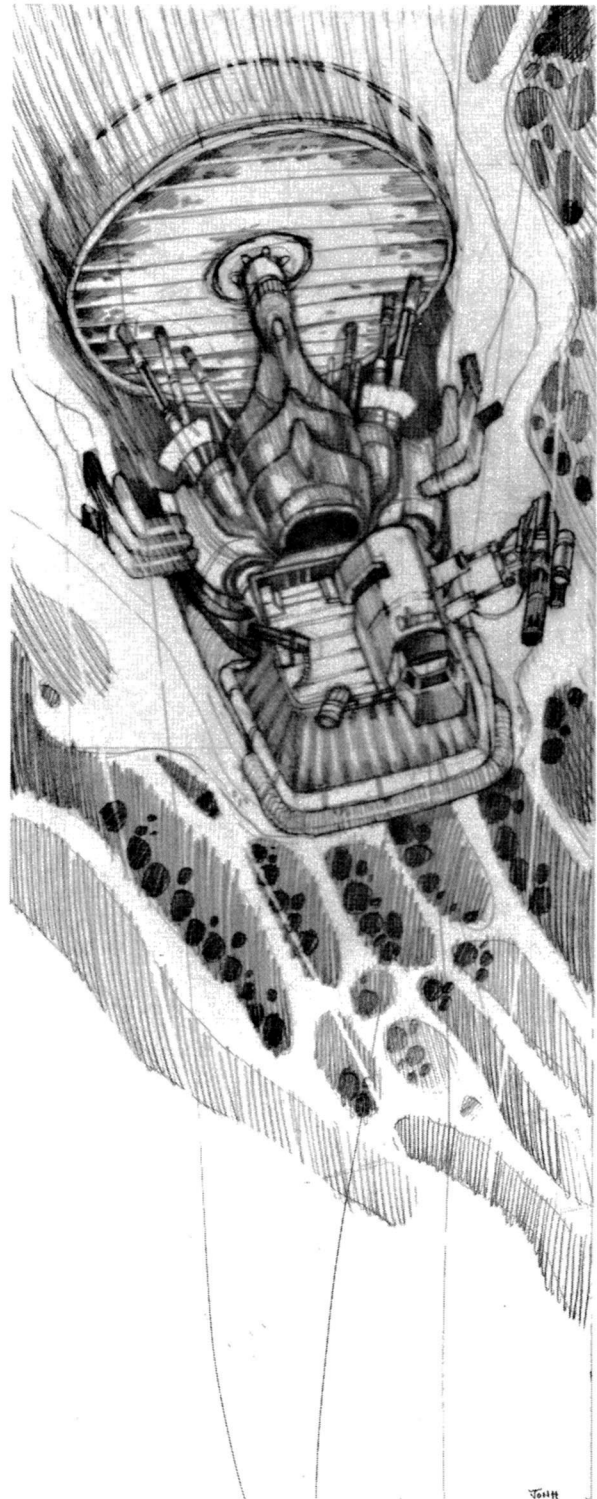
Former industrial and production areas and other terrains are frequently used as Circuit combat zones. They come in several different types of territory, ranging from the abandoned factories scattered throughout the World of Progress to the deep wildernesses on the other side of the world. In each case, there are unique opportunities and dangers with each new terrain.

WILDERNESS

There are places on Mort, far beyond the walls of Mort City, where civilisation has not touched the ground for many centuries. It is in these places that the darkest secrets lie, and some of the most intense matches take place. The administration informs me that they pick map co-ordinates, assign a notional fight zone, drop-ship in a bunch of Killers and a flotilla of spot-bees, and let crews handle filming from the safety of the ship, which retreats to the edge of the game zone. Any survivors will be collected at contest's end. Missing persons are presumed dead, so don't be late back to the rendezvous, or you'll have to go native.

The danger inherent with these locations is that they are uncharted. The terrain is unpredictable and unstable, and the advantage will be with those individuals most in touch with their natural surroundings. The best policy for these locations is to get some sort of recon done before the match. Find the place that best suits your abilities, and don't stray from it unless you absolutely have to. If prior recon is impossible due to either circumstance or placing, then knowledge of your opponents will serve you best.

Be wary in places such as these. Although Mort is technically a dead biosphere, there are a number of life-forms extant on the planet, most of which mutate swiftly down the generations. There is a high chance that there may be creatures or even plant forms present that you have never previously encountered. If you do not know what a thing is, assume that it is extremely dangerous and probably lethally toxic. If a thing is assumed dangerous, try not to irritate it. Most beasts will ignore you unless provoked or immensely hungry. Basic courtesies may save your life. Wilderness areas are some of the most astonishingly dangerous places on Mort, and while the drop-ship may scare off some creatures, it may also attract bolder ones looking for a snack. Be careful.



Be aware of the pickup and exit points from fight areas. There will almost certainly always be one person covering them, looking for a convenient, sneaky kill. If you have to get out of an area quickly, try not to enter areas that you have not yet been to, as these will be dangerous. Wilderness areas are mainly used for Last Man Standing and Hunter contests. One of the more popular

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challenges at the moment seems to involve loosing an exotic beast that knows the area and several Killers that don't into the zone, and seeing which one comes out in the least number of pieces.

WASTELAND

These territories are so called because they are exactly that, a waste of land. The derelict remains of old factories, storage areas, research stations and communities, weapons ranges, and so on, they are vast barren deserts of ruins, junk and rubble – and the remains of the people who have gone before. These ruins are rarely more than 50 years old. Over the course of half a century, the corrosive atmosphere and predatory microbes on Mort can reduce any material in an abandoned territory to the muck that passes for soil, and the area becomes reclassified as wilderness. Cities, by the way, are protected to an extent by the vast quantities of heat generated by their biomass and mechanical devices, which is why Downtown buildings typically take several centuries of neglect to rot entirely. In wasteland areas, contests are usually scheduled for locations where there a lot of cover available, such as a ruined factory, but it is not unheard of for a completely exposed venue to be selected. Cover is unstable at best anyway, and will not provide decent protection from medium or heavy calibre weapons fire. This can be turned to the advantage of those who know how, though.

The instability of the rubble that the contests take place on can be used by a Killer who is sure of themselves – such as, in the case of the long gunner, taking a position in an area where the surrounding terrain will collapse or make noise if other combatants attempt to approach. In the case of the close-fighting specialist, try to choose ground that suits your fighting style and not that of your opponent. If they are heavier, choose broken ground where their size will be a disadvantage. If they are faster or more skilled, find ground that introduces an element of caution or chance. Shifting piles of debris are excellent for this purpose.

Always remember to beware of loose rubble covering pits. If the ground starts suddenly shifting underfoot, it is advisable to get away from the area you are in. Remember also that some wasteland areas were once munitions test ranges and chemical experimentation sites. This can mean that there may be all sorts of hidden hazard that just cannot be guessed at from the covering ruins. Curiosity is a bad trait in a Contract Killer at any time, but it can prove spectacularly stupid in wasteland areas. Simple elimination matches are often scheduled for these areas because of the lack of other tactical considerations that the arenas offer.

SUSPENSION PLATFORMS

Kept out of the public eye following the Stolze Sector Disaster of 640SD, suspension platforms have recently been okayed for Contract Circuit contests. Held miles above the surface of Mort, suspension platforms are maintained in a geostationary orbit above the cloud layer. The exact method used to keep these

platforms in the air is classified at SCL 5, but then it doesn't really matter. Generally used as either atmospheric testing and monitoring laboratories or as hazardous materials laboratories and production zones, these platforms consist of a number of different levels of chain-mesh decking and/or solid flooring interlinked with stairwells and walkways, and equipment and furnishings dependent on the platform's original function.

The primary tactical problem with these platforms is that it is hardly possible to move up or down without giving a clear shot to anyone on the level being entered. For this reason, grapples and lines are very popular in this sort of venue. Another issue associated with these platforms is weather. Due to the high atmosphere that the platforms are kept in, the air is substantially colder and thinner which may cause breathing problems or fatigue in city-dwelling Killers. Some platforms are dropped into the cloud layer, where the thick smog clouds and howling winds reduce visibility to near zero.

Some extremely popular events are held above the ocean over zones of open water, and the platforms are brought down to a mere hundred feet above the waves. The combination of torrential rain and driving waves crashing into the platforms provides a very real risk of a combatant being washed over the edge –always a great favourite with the audience. The other guaranteed popularity booster for suspension platform contests is when the security net below the platform is removed prior to the engagement...

TESTING ZONES

Specifically constructed combat areas (usually within wasteland or wilderness locations) designed to offer a tailor-made challenge in one way or another, these areas are unique in manner and design, and typically require new approaches to fighting. These arenas are built up as sealed buildings, to provide 3rd Eye with the facilities that they require to support properly-produced vid footage. It is difficult to make any sensible suggestions as these zones vary so widely – from trapped 3D mazes of bars, nets and ropes through to working factory floors.

COLD STORAGE

Refrigerated zones, maintained at a temperature far below Mort standard which offer facilities for the storage of perishable goods. These are perfect for Wraith Killers to operate within, but less ideal for others. Infrared is critical in a place like this – even the breath of a normal creature will leave a trail like brightest day. Contract Killers who are not Wraith Raiders would be well advised to wear thermally sealed armour when operating in these zones.

KILLING GROUNDS

Similar to the Operative training rooms in Meny and other top institutions, these places are usually purpose-built open arenas

with three or less levels to them. Training robots and devices will be located in these areas, but the weaponry will be fully armed and lethal. ECM suits and sneakware are advised for these areas, as are any devices that can impede robotic tracking systems. If you are Operative-trained, you may remember all the tricks that beat your combat robots while you were in training. They don't work.

INACTIVE FACTORIES

Amongst the more popular of the contests set in industrial zones, factory areas provide both the greatest rewards, and the greatest challenges. Throughout the world of progress, sub-company fortunes and the demands of technology mean that the factories and plants within the boundaries of Mort City that are used to create machines, vehicles, and equipment are sometimes allowed to fall into disrepair. In many of these cases, such factories are still intact in the most part, albeit with their insides scavenged by gangs and Carrien.

Inactive factories are derelict, and may have remained so for quite some time. As Suburbia territories are usually quickly reclaimed, inactive factories are usually located in Downtown and the surrounding areas. They are dark holes of decay and death. Gantries and walkways are usually damaged or broken, and the power (where there is any) is sporadic at best. The problems involved in areas like these centre around the unpredictability of the terrain. Most things in Downtown are poorly documented, and many these factories have absolutely no recorded floor-plans whatsoever. The lack of power means no light, no moving parts – so it should be no problem, right?

Wrong.

Standard tactics say that low-light situations require use infra-red or ultra-violet goggles. No moving parts mean no background noise, which makes it easier for people to be heard, so be stealthy. These are good thoughts... but everyone else will have had the exact same ones. Be inspired. Creativity is the key. You have to know what is in the mind of your opponents. If they are using IR, pack a cool suit – they can be found in sizes other than Wraith. If they are using UV, pack some flares. Either way, a remote-triggering torch can be a godsend, as can a halogen strobe. If you don't know what your opponents are using – and you probably won't – take a little of everything, just in case.

ACTIVE FACTORIES

Possibly the greatest challenge to the modern contract killers, active factories are specially maintained by Circuit authorities to allow for a greater range of combat and possibility. There are many different types of factory that are used, and it would be impossible to catalogue all the variants that are possible. However, common elements of the factories in question are reinforced walkways designed to withstand the weight of Chagrins in armour, heavy machinery, dumb robots and construction tools,

and an abundant source of power. These features are a godsend to those who know how make use of them.

War-world armour can withstand most projectiles, but put it in a crusher designed to box up the remains of APCs and it will quickly end up as a can of puréed contract killer. The same applies to industrial cutters, arc-lights and shredders. It is worth investigating the natural resources of the factory that you are in, too. In the case of forges, there will be containers of molten metal all around, capable of melting armour and opponents alike. In old Karma facilities, pools of acid and enzyme catalysts will be all around, while not always immediately fatal, these things will inevitably slow your opponents if you push them into them.

Infrared and motion scanners will be of little use in active factories, as the heat generated by the forges, machines, and reactors will often turn your field of vision into a large red blur.



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The problems caused by factories are that anyone with sufficient knowledge of industrial mechanics will be at a tremendous advantage if they can secure the use of the machines. For this reason, it is advisable to stay away from the mechanics unless the control booth is explosive-proof – as it is absolutely certain that everyone will be targeting the booth the moment the machinery starts trying to cut people up.

One final word of caution. There are often pools of oil, lubricant and fuel lying around in active factories. Try not to slip.

GENERAL FACTORY TACTICS

Peripheral vision – the eyes are very useful things, but most people only use them to look directly at something. What they don't realise is that even when looking directly at something, the eyes can still see all the other things going on around them. Machinery is smooth in its movement and repetitive with its patterns. The eyes can recognise this. When looking at an area, don't concentrate on one point, try to see the whole picture instead. All the machines will move in patterns, so anything that is not moving in a pattern is not a machine and will be where your opponents are. Some of the more experienced Killers will be familiar with this tactic and do their best to blend in, but the eyes will know the difference. That applies to you too, so try to stay still.

Dropping things – are there heavy objects being suspended in the factory? Drop them on your opponents, and be aware that your opponents might want to drop them on you. If it's not welded to something, don't step on or under it.

Power – if it's on and you don't need it, find a way to turn it off. Your opponents might not be as prepared.

Research – the best Contract Killers aren't the fastest, the strongest or the meanest ones; they're the smartest. If plans of the areas you're to be fighting in are available, get them, study them, even take them with you if you can. Similarly, if you can find out who your opponents are, do so. Learn how they fight, what they are capable of, how they prefer to fight.

LOWER DOWNTOWN

by Phantom, Human Kick Murder Operative, SCL 7D

"Yeah, I saw the Downtown GoreZone last week. I always watch them when Sour Blood is on; he's just so strong and powerful. Pity about that fall though, that metal rod went right through him. He looked so helpless impaled there, especially when Deity just walked past him shaking his head. Hey, if he's looking for anyone to nurse him better, I'll do it. I saw a programme on stab wounds last week and I remember everything about it. I guess he's already got lots of young nurses around him by now though. Oh well, I'm sure he'll be back on the vid soon."



Lisa Turner (13) Human Female, Civilian.

Almost a millennium in the making, Lower Downtown is one of the deadliest combat arenas. Whilst most other locations are static, the environment of Downtown can change dramatically during a fight. The stairway you are walking down could collapse at any moment. The alleyway you are in could suddenly start filling with water. The streetlights that guide your way may short out, plunging you into darkness. It is this randomness that makes Lower Downtown such a feared arena for Contract Killers. And yet the public cries out for more fights in Lower Downtown, thrilled by the chance that the Killers on their screens might find themselves defeated by the very environment that they themselves battle with every day. Fame and reputation mean little here. The city treats everyone the same, and only those who are fortunate survive unscathed.

Up on the surface, Downtown looks easy to navigate. Street level has roads and pavements as well as reinforced meshwork walkways, and it could seem almost like Suburbia, were it not for the general decay and the street people. Pedestrian bridges connect the densely packed housing, with stairways and ladders reaching down to the depths and up to the heights. Tall railings surround them to stop anyone from falling off, and streetlamps light up the way ahead. Looking down from a bridge, lights can be seen twinkling back up from the streets. Rain pours from the gutters and building edges all around, trickling down into the depths of Downtown, whilst SCAFs fly between the buildings and walkways, patrolling for the public safety.

As you descend below ground and into Lower Downtown, the very nature of the area changes. It's a meshwork maze in three dimensions, curving in tight, claustrophobic passages around the knots of housing. The great majority of Lower Downtown's levels are residential in nature, great sprawling complexes of complicated buildings slotted together like crazy paving slabs. The walkways that make up the levels wind through and around the complexes, running past countless graffiti-clad front doors and down winding corridors. It feels like one of the old Suburban council housing projects, only there's no end to it. The meshwork floor of most walkways can hardly be seen, covered as they are with years of accumulated trash, people sleeping rough, and god alone knows what else. Sometimes the ceiling is right above you, providing a walkway for the level above; sometimes the gap might be as much as three or four levels up to the next grid. Walkways don't run parallel anyway, so it's like a big heap of sticks thrown around a dead octopus. Water and all sorts of disgusting crap drips down from the levels above, trickling through the steel gridwork and off the ceiling-mounted lamps that provide the little light there is. The wind is continual, a vile air streaming out of the depths.

Every so often, the tight walkways give way to a more open space designed to provide something like a shopping area. Where all the various housing blocks don't quite slot together evenly, a gap is

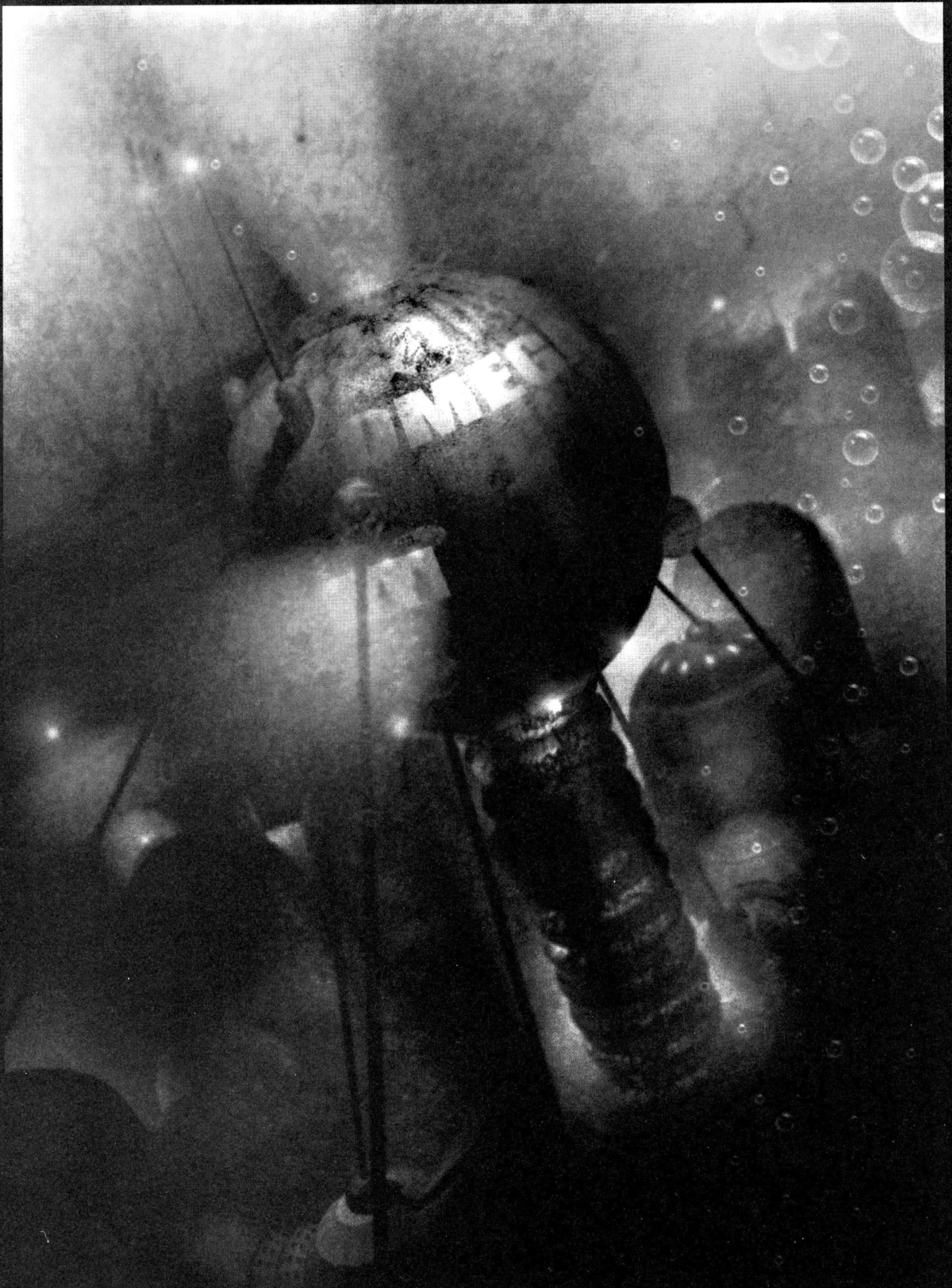
left that the locals sarcastically refer to as 'squares'. A few are used to contain larger free-standing buildings like power stations, Shiver stations, warehouses and so on, but most are given over to commercial activity. The restless congregate here, in nasty little bars, clubs, shops and cinemas. You can get pretty much anything you want, so long as it's shitty food, shitty drink, shitty clothing or shitty sex. Movement between levels is officially by rusting mesh stairs or rampways – they only ever go up or down to the next nearest walkway – or unofficially, voluntarily or otherwise, by collapsed walkways.

Lots of the space is inaccessible, of course. Behind the levels and the buildings, there's a crazy patchwork of solid rock, sewer pipes, huge air tunnels into the deeps, utility cabling, and even special constructions like road tunnels, facilities, and stuff like that. Everything's supported by everything else, reinforced by carefully placed concrete pylons as necessary. Like the Shivers, the roads just don't go below level five, so after that it's strictly by foot only. As you go further, the surroundings get older and more decrepit, there are more and more collapses, and the people get fewer – and stranger. Below level 20, well, that's where the benefits handouts stop. No-one sensible goes below level 20. Even GoreZones don't happen below level 15.

Collapsed cables snake their way everywhere, failing to provide enough power to the ceiling lights, let alone all of the people also dependent on it. The rainwater finds its own channels through the labyrinth, pouring through holes and running along the tunnels. All around, faint sighs can be heard from the buildings as they resist the urge to collapse in on themselves. Sparking noises crackle from the damp power lines, whilst the water splashes an unknown tune. As the levels go deeper, little changes beside the age of the building materials. Dangerous areas are bordered by rusting wire fences, signs unreadable due to age.

Fights through the levels and across the walkways are hazardous, as the decayed paths can collapse at any time. With little available cover other than line-of-sight, and an unreliable surface, speed and manoeuvrability became the key to success. Acrobatic leaps through shafts or holes, or down into places where a square opens out onto one side, can cut down the time to descend, although only the brave will try such desperate moves. Grappling guns and climbing equipment are often useful, especially to gain a quick escape. Quicker still are Reality Fold and Silverback, although these are rare on the Circuit.

Close quarter fights on walkways can be especially dangerous. The side walls are unable to take much pressure, and may just as easily lead to a five-level drop as to someone's lounge. Contract Killers hoping that they are enough to prevent them falling are quite mistaken. Cables winding in and out of buildings are often within reach, although some are actually dangerous just to touch. In desperate times, the meshwork floor of the walkway can often be broken through, although it's impossible to say how far the drop will be, or onto/into what.



In with the poor people forced to live here, there are all sorts of evils that prey on the unfortunate. The Skin Trade is a particular scourge, but it's not much worse than the gangs, soft companies, scavenger groups, cults, murderers, monsters and manchines. Most will leave a well-armed Contract Killer surrounded by media spot-bees or camera crews alone, preferring to hide in the hope of avoiding discovery. If you stumble onto them, they'll fight back hard to protect their pitiful territories, and they have the advantage of knowing the area perfectly. They tend to come down hard and fast on trespassers before vanishing back into the shadows. Some however are too greedy to wait, and you have to expect attack from a bewildering range of opponents at any moment. LAD is out of the question below level 3, which is worth remembering too.

Battling through the depths of Downtown, you'll have more than just enemies to be wary of. The ground is covered with rubbish and broken rubble, concealing threats that range from live electricity cables to specially set deadfall traps. The surface is hazardous to run over, and if you're going to avoid plummeting five levels and snapping both legs, you'll need to walk slowly, checking that the ground can take your weight. The weak lighting leaves all sorts of areas in shadow, and conceals dead ends. Hidden recesses and turns can conceal rivals hiding in wait for a passing opportunity. Killers who want to be successful in Lower Downtown must learn to use the environment to their advantage. Holes, live wires and more can be easily concealed by debris. Opponents can be lured in to dead ends and trapped or ambushed from above. Natural shadows can be used to play cat and mouse with the inexperienced.

"Stick to the shadows and make sure you have a safe route back out again. That's how you win in Downtown. Oh, and don't trust anything. Not the walls, the floor, any movement, or even any sounds – down there it all ends up distorted beyond recognition."

Johnny Automatic, Human Male, Contract Killer.

Remembering the terrain is the easiest way to survive a fight in Lower Downtown. Those who win move quickly and quietly through the safest areas, tricking their opponents into locations that they can be ambushed in. Establishing paths through a potential landslide can easily give you an advantage over an unprepared opponent. Electrify a wire fence while leaving a gap just large enough to pass through can offer you a trap that will catch pursuers unaware. Weak walls can be rigged to fall on rivals, trapping them or acting as a distraction. ECM clothing will confuse anyone stupid enough to try to use motion scanners and IR and UV can be overcome by hiding near to waterfalls and clouds of dust.

Occasionally, specific areas will be set aside for GoreZones and other Circuit fights. These are prepared by media teams in advance to establish the boundaries that the Killers are restricted to. Operatives are hired to patrol the boundaries and ensure that Killers don't leave the area. They're also to give warning of any

large-scale threats that might enter the area. Circuit staff may be asked to set up booby traps and obstructions, making the actual event more spectacular. Common traps include trip lines fitted to flares and tear gas, hidden man-traps and obscured drops, and structures rigged to collapse.

Killers who stay ahead of everyone else tend to remain high up, where they can observe people below, or hide amongst the shadows at the bottom of the area, waiting to ambush unsuspecting opponents. They also ensure that they have escape routes worked out through areas that are structurally safe. Only the inexperienced will try running through an area that they haven't already visited. Hit and run tactics are often popular, as each Contract Killer tries to utilise the natural territory to weaken their opponents. But really, the main enemy in these fights is Lower Downtown itself.

RESEARCH STATIONS

by Dr. Philip Simpson, Dept. of Archaeology, SCL 4B

When a push was made a few years ago to acquire sites for off-Mort competitions, Contract Circuit scouts found that they lacked the budget to mount their own explorations. Instead they petitioned the Dept. of Expeditions and worked out a mutually beneficial arrangement, the full details of which are unavailable. Newly discovered worlds are now open to limited use by the Contract Circuit in return for security details and an undisclosed number of sweep and clears of hostile indigenous species.

Research Teams are responsible for the classification of each new world discovered and its fate within the World of Progress. They are typically classified as a resource of some sort, as testing areas for the Dept. of War, or as worthy of further research in the interests of scientific advance. All offer a broad range of opportunities for confrontations with hostile environmental conditions and/or local wildlife.

Science teams are regularly accompanied by a Cloak Division observer and Contract Circuit scout when deploying to a new planetary surface in their research transports, known as IMLVs or "em-el-vees". This stands for "Independent Modular Lab Vehicle", and is a Vertical Take-Off and Landing-equipped workstation customised for slow locomotion in a specific environment. Groups of IMLVs are landed and then link together to provide 'snap-n-go' facilities and staging areas for survey operations. Two weeks are normally allocated to fully evaluate a world and classify it into an environment type, but due to pressure from the Contract Circuit the evaluation time has been cut in half. As such, only general information is available to competitors. There are five classes of atmosphere-bearing world which are opened to Circuit bouts.

AQUEOUS

These water worlds offer a scenic change for Mort's urban predators. When the majority of the planet surface is submerged, bouts are held on floating IMLV platforms, in undersea habitats, or even in the water itself. The skies are typically open horizon to horizon, which can be disconcerting. More than one Killer has opted out of this sort of fight due to attacks of agoraphobia and motion sickness. Exotic wildlife can be plentiful, and is almost always considered dangerous.

Example: Graphis 6

Status: Active pending transfer to Dept. of War.

DESERT/WASTELAND

Sweeping dunes, harsh winds, and blinding light characterise wasteland environments. With temperatures swinging from punishingly hot in the day to freezingly cold at night, special environment suits and filtration tools are required. Surprisingly, some wildlife does usually manage to exist, but not in quantities sufficient to cause much concern. What life there is usually turns out to be toxic though, so try not to get bitten.

Example: Taris 2 (set in a binary system).

Status: Active pending transfer to Dept of Mineralogy as a Resource World.

ARBOREAL

Rich foliage and forests, ranging from sparse carboniferous forests to the equivalent of dense jungles characterise these future resource worlds. The air is thick, humid, and uncomfortable by Mort standards, often creating heat exhaustion and exertion problems for unprepared competitors. Visitors should be particularly careful regarding wildlife, which is generally both plentiful and aggressive.

Example: Morgan's World

Status: Active whilst exploration and evaluation continues.

ARCTIC

Plains of endless tundra or frozen rock are popular with Wraith Raiders assigned to survey duty. To others, the extreme sub-zero temperatures that can drop as low as -140c in some cases require the use of heavily insulated thermal suits and breathing apparatuses similar to those used in space environments. In addition to the harsh environment, wildlife may thrive and is often quite dangerous.

Example: Glitter

Status: <D-Notice>

GAS GIANT

These massive worlds are comprised of gas held in place by the gravitational force generated by a dense core, and subject to intense atmospheric disturbances. Competition takes place either within the outer fringe of the giant using individual low-g propulsion packs, or within the confines of specially designed habitats similar to zero-g space stations. Firearms are forbidden within the facilities due to the potential for a hull breach.

Example: Matliss 9

Status: Active; mining/exploitation operations in progress.

UNIQUE THREATS

Any competitor signing on for Research Station fights must be prepared to deal with a variety of environmental threats, most of which will not be fully documented. You may even end up being the first person to register such a threat, perhaps posthumously. Fortunately, most threats fall into one of a small number of categories.

Atmosphere and Pressure. If the air is toxic or lacks the required amount of oxygen, sealed suits and breathing gear have to be worn. This means increased equipment requirements, possible encumbrance, and a definite vulnerability that must be protected. If the world has particularly high atmospheric pressure, competitors will have to wear pressurised hard suits that may also suffer from puncture or failure.

Temperature. The Temperature is seldom a threat on Mort, which offers damp cold as its most common feature. On other worlds – such as those of the Desert or Arctic varieties – temperature provides a constant threat that requires the use of armour, or a sealed environment suit, with climate control capability. Unfortunately, external equipment such as weapons, drug injectors, and breathing gear are susceptible to extreme changes and may fail.

Weather. The Weather also presents a threat that must be carefully considered by off-world competitors. While most Mort-based Killers are used to cold rain, they may be out of their depth when faced with thunderstorms, lightning, high winds, and even snow or sleet. The impact can be substantial and devastating if it is not considered in advance. Draw opponents into areas where the natural hazards can take care of them for you. This includes blasting iced-over lakes beneath a rival, baiting him into the path of lava flows, and burying him in an avalanche. Only the creative and ruthless get the best sponsorships.

Indigenous Life. The potential for interference – or outright attack – by indigenous life varies from world to world, but is usually far higher for planets destined for a Resource classification. On some worlds, like Graphis 6 and Morlos (jungle), the indigenous life is both so plentiful and hostile that some events are actually collaborative rather than competitive,

Killers working together to try to avoid outright slaughter by the local creatures. In environments with aggressive populations of wildlife, draw out the critters and lead them to your competitors. While this may not improve your popularity with your peers, 'Carrien mobbing' has been long employed on Mort, and the public always love it.

Suit Breach. On worlds where an atmosphere's toxicity or pressure requires a sealed or pressurised suit, an opponent's equipment makes a valuable target. Try to create a minor breach in a suit or air tank then follow up with an ultra-violent finisher while the victim is distracted.

Sabotage. The old adage that says "if you're not winning, you're not cheating hard enough" always applies to the more unscrupulous Killers on the Circuit, in any venue. If you are about to enter a bout against superior opponents where equipment could prove vital, a little sabotage can give you the edge. In areas where specific items are required to survive, a bout can be ended with little trouble.

Booby traps. Bouts on Research Worlds have few restrictions against collateral damage, so the use of lethal booby traps is frequently encouraged (within the rules of the bout). Since the main difficulty is getting them placed in time to use, proximity mines and tripwires are common. Look out for them – and prepare your own. A bit of effort learning the terrain of regular competition sites can be invaluable when the time comes to prepare ambushes, set more elaborate traps, and utilise the environment as a weapon.

General Threats. The general category includes persistent environmental threats such as constant lightning strikes, meteor showers, volcanic and tectonic activity, and massive storms. These are usually well defined in reports, offering too few surprises for competitors.

OPPORTUNITIES

Contract Killers signing on for Research Station fights automatically draw the attention of potential sponsors, but must demonstrate both courage and a sense of adventure to profit by it. The Department of Exploration offers its own myriad of special perks to Killers who perform well in off-world bouts, regardless of sponsorship. These include bonuses for the recovery of lost equipment or personnel, the discovery of mineral deposits or ruins, and the capture or termination of unknown organisms. It is rumoured that particularly influential competitors may also be eligible for rewards following appearances that bring more recruits to the frontier worlds.

STAGED CONTESTS

Even though Research Station competitions cover a larger variety of arenas than any other venue, there are relatively few custom bout contests. The most common are probably Stalk and Clear, in



which the competition is based in a cover filled environment (jungle, cliffs, kelp beds, asteroid fields, etc) through which Killers must manoeuvre and stalk opponents; Dead Courier, which is set in areas that have heavy foliage, with Team A setting out individually to deliver packages to a predetermined site while Team B sets out to stop them, bonuses being awarded for the termination of rival competitors; Perimeter & Intruders, in which Team A attempts to protect a predetermined perimeter while Team B act as attackers and attempt to destroy a particular objective; and Pack Attack – a blatant rip-off of GoreZone events which places Killers in an area filled with packs of indigenous life forms, so that competitors must survive against each other and against the hordes of hostile creatures.

ZERO-GEE

by K'pnk R'mn, Shaktar Pilot & Navigation Operative, SCL 6A

Dark Frontiers started operations as the space-based arm of the Circuit administration some thirty years ago. Drawing on the experience and wisdom of the Shaktar trade lords, the group began the task of preparing facilities for Circuit competitions at off-world locations. The program has been wildly successful, and over the last quarter-century, public interest in zero-gee fights has grown throughout the World of Progress. These matches are dangerous, but their popularity comes from the fact that even the

bravest and most resourceful competitors are guaranteed to be pushed to the limit. Since most Mort dwellers take things such as (reasonably) breathable air, habitable temperatures and gravity for granted, Dark Frontiers matches provide a rude awakening. Contract Killers must learn new ways to move and fight to have any chance of victory.

Combat in a zero-gee environment comes with a unique set of problems for the Contract Killer. These primarily involve coping with movement, recoil, and atmospheric decompression. Skill in zero-gee manoeuvring can go some way to compensating for movement and recoil issues, but even the most experienced space traveller still has difficulties. Obviously, artificial gravity systems like the ones to be found in the majority of Ion Drive ships eliminate zero-gee problems completely, but these are never made available for Dark Frontiers matches.

The first obstacle to overcome is movement. In zero-gee, anything but an uncontrolled spin is difficult for unskilled individuals. Without the necessary training on how to control and generate momentum, any normal action risks sending a character into an uncontrolled and potentially damaging tumble. A Killer caught in a spin will tumble at a speed and direction appropriate to the movement that started it. Movement can only be halted when the Killer hits something, comes close enough to a solid structural object to grab hold of it, or manages to generate some momentum to compensate.

Killers operating in zero-gee environments are equipped with either handheld or backpack-based propulsion devices, called flitters, that help to facilitate movement. These are invaluable if you know how to use them, but – much like normal movement – a complete horror if you do not. However, they do offer you the ability to regain control and manoeuvrability in situations where no solid surfaces are in reach. Their use is taught as part of the zero-gee manoeuvring skill.

Recoil is another major problem in zero-gee environments. Special needs ensure that in zero-gee, any Killer who normally savours a solid recoil in a weapon will soon learn to dread it. Normally, firearm users rely upon their body weight to help anchor themselves in place, but in zero-gee or free fall the results of it can be disastrous. If fired without any kind of bracing, such as magnetic grips on boots or a solid hold on a wall, the user is pushed backwards from the direction of fire. The result is a rapid end-over-end tumble away from the gun. Highly skilled zero-gee fighters can take advantage of this blowback to attempt to redirect the recoil into a controlled roll, working the situation as if it were just a normal acrobatic movement between shots. This is also highly cinematic, which often appeals to 3rd Eye controllers.

Most combatants first try to avoid recoil by only using melee weapons, but solid impacts and hard strikes create the same effects. When a hand to hand attack hits, both the victim and the attacker are pushed back and must use their skill at zero-gee manoeuvres to stay in control. If the attack misses, the attacker

will still need to compensate to avoid a tumble. The harder the strike, the more serious the recoil problems are. Truly skilled zero-gee experts fight deliberately slowly with low-impact weapons, such as shriek knives or poisoned blades, limiting their movement rate to a soft flow.

The third factor in space environments is atmospheric decompression. The walls of space facilities are relatively thin when compared to their Mort equivalents, and they cannot take much damage before buckling. Even a 10mm round may puncture one. When this happens, the air in the sealed environment is sucked howling into space, taking the occupants and their equipment with it as the breach peels and widens. Not surprisingly, firearms are banned outside of specially designed and armoured facilities, and even these only permit standard 10mm weapons. When a facility wall is breached, heavy airlock doors drop to seal the affected section off and prevent a further loss of atmosphere. At this point, any trapped occupant who is unable to scramble into a vacuum suit is mere seconds away from their ancestors – and even in a suit, you will need a flitter to avoid being blasted off into the void.

Events set outside of pressurized areas require the same sort of vacuum suits. These, of course, are also subject to decompression. The basic suit resists damage slightly more robustly than a suit of Body Blocker armour, but stronger equipment, while expensive, can be obtained by specialist Killers. When a suit is breached, the escaping atmosphere propels the wearer away from the direction of the opening until patched. Once the suit's 100-hour air supply voids – which takes about 20 seconds, if the breach is small – the victim starts to smother.

Contract Killers who specialize in zero-gee talk about the unlimited freedom of duelling without gravity and often incorporate acrobatic manoeuvres into their fighting styles. The bouts have a distinct cinematic quality, and skilled opponents fight in a graceful ballet that has captured the public's attention. Since sponsors such as MAL and MAC are flocking to support the new venue, the promise of easier sponsorships makes the threat of decompression a distant concern.

Fighting in zero-gee is considerably more hazardous than in most other venues. Even submission bouts often prove accidentally fatal following excess enthusiasm, and the chance of corpse retrieval in time for LAD stabilisation is extremely low. The bouts themselves are, ultimately, skewed in favour of Contract Killers with quicker wits. Conventional two-dimensional tactics are useless, since all fighting occurs within a three-dimensional arena, bringing a revolutionary "dog-fighting" aspect to melee combat. Successful fighters take advantage of this and also learn to use the unique threats of the environment as weapons. There are a number of tried and tested tactics.

Friendly decompression is something of an oxymoron. You can spike open an opponent's vacuum suit to distract him, and execute your finisher as he scrambles for a patch. If you decide to

breach a facility wall, make sure you have access to the only functional spacesuit. Death by airlock is no more exciting then dispatching an opponent by blowing him into space without a suit. After an opponent has been crippled or incapacitated, toss him into an airlock and hit the bright red button labelled 'purge'. Obviously, avoid this technique if the fight is not to the death, but if you are in a lethal match, death by airlock will net the victor a double fee.

When fighting in space, puncturing the main tank of an opponent's propulsion pack or oxygen system will ensure that he is blown away from the facility out of control and into deep space. The recovery craft will probably get to him before it's too late, but the viewers always adore a little 'Lost in Space'. If you're fighting around a platform in a planet's low orbit, Lost in Space can quickly send your opponent into the atmosphere instead, leaving the viewers to enjoy the flaming vapour trail as he burns up in Re-entry. Finally, during a space combat match, you can take out an opponent's breathing tubes and watch him flail around as he swiftly chokes to death. Always check your equipment before donning it, as less scrupulous opponents may opt to have it sabotaged ahead of time.

In addition to the standard competition types, several events specific to zero-gee environments have sprung up under the Dark Frontiers umbrella. In Boarding Party, two teams of Contract Killers battle to control the hulk of an Ion drive freighter. The first team attempts to stall attackers while repairs are made to the propulsion system, while the second team attempts to take control of the ship. The first team wins if they can retain control of and repair the ship in the allotted time. Hunt & Kill is a combat show held within a debris field, such as a ship hulk graveyard, small asteroid field, and so on. There are plenty of environmental threats in this sort of environment, and good dog-fighting opportunities for Killers capable of 3-D planning.

Net Match features a series of mined nets anchored to buoys. These are set up to form an arena, preventing escape. In some cases, additional obstacles such as proximity mines are placed within the play area to liven things up. The net mines are contact-triggered, so kicking an opponent into the nets can prove quite spectacular. Rat Trap is held within a specially designed modular facility that is equipped with armoured walls and multiple control areas. Competitors – either individual or teams – attempt to commandeer various control stations spread throughout the facility to seal sections, open airlocks, and turn gravity on or off.

Regardless of the contest type however, Dark Frontiers fights can be some of the most elegantly savage contests available on the Circuit. They also offer an unparalleled opportunity to impress the fans against the deadliest backdrop yet uncovered. After all, deep down everyone is scared of empty vacuum.

ZERO-GEE GAME NOTES

All movements and actions within zero-gee environments fall under a special skill. Without the Zero-Gee Manoeuvres skill, all physical actions first require a DEX roll at -8; any failure sends the character into a tumble. During an uncontrolled tumble, attacks made against the character are at +4, and spin recovery can be attempted as a DEX roll at -6; all other actions are at a flat penalty of -12. In zero-gee environments, physical skills are capped at the level of the Zero-Gee Manoeuvres skill.

Firearms recoil is doubled in low gravity, and each projectile attack requires a successful Zero-Gee Manoeuvres roll to stay in control, with the doubled recoil serving as a penalty. Users do not take any damage for recoil higher than their STR stat, however. If the control roll is passed, the user has successfully turned the recoil into an acrobatic head-over-heels flip, which gives a -2 movement penalty to attacks in his or her next phase. It also looks damn cool.

In hand-to-hand, a character struck or striking in zero-gee combat must roll their Zero-Gee Manoeuvres skill minus one half of the weapon's damage to retain control. If the strike misses, the wielder's roll is at -3 instead of half DAM. As with firearm attacks, a failure sends the character tumbling uncontrolled (rotating in the direction of the arm strike).

When caught in a decompression, either a hull breach or a suit puncture, all characters get a -4 fear penalty to all actions as the atmosphere exits, regardless of Cool, drugs or any other factors; deep space is a primal terror. Characters also gain a stress point each time a number of rounds equal to their Zero-Gee Manoeuvres skill passes – or one each round for characters without the skill. That aside, characters can attempt any number of actions during decompression including holding on, attempting to seal the hole, or climbing into a spacesuit to survive the atmosphere loss. A solid two-handed grip and a STR roll at -15 are required to avoid being sucked into an un-patched hull breach until the atmosphere is completely voided. When exposed to vacuum, a character must make a PHYS roll every three rounds (9 seconds) to remain conscious. Every three rounds beyond the first adds a -1 penalty. Once the character has lost consciousness, he suffers 3 points of damage per round until dead or rescued. Whilst there is only one who is a Contract Killer, GMs should note that Necanthropes are immune to all of these decompression rules, including fear penalties, and as such they make excellent controllers for Dark Frontiers matches.

She glared at him, which showed some spirit. "You are hunting razorheads. There is a large nest a few miles from here. The winner is the first to ten kills. Skulls are the only accepted proof of a kill. Try not to fight each other; the razorheads are more than dangerous enough."

"What is the hunt worth?", asked the Bushmaster.

"The winner gets a purse of 4000c. You all get a bonus of 150c per head."

"What is the time frame?" rumbles Tachi.

"There's no limit, but you are advised to be back to this base before dusk."

There were a few chuckles at that, as if Killers would be afraid of the dark. We were ferried out into the jungle by dropship and left at points that ringed the entry area. We were each given a map and locator for the centre in case we got lost or bored, and then left to fend for ourselves. The sheer amount of life around me was staggering. The constant barrage of noise and movement was nearly overloading my various detectors and sensors. I switched off my motion scanners and audio enhancements, which helped. I was in a large clearing, surrounded by trees taller than most Downtown buildings, and accompanied by a small swarm of spot-bees. I glanced at my monitor - all life signs still active, razorheads to the south, base to the north. I drew my sword and readied my pistol, then started south towards the razorheads.

I hadn't got far when my headset beeped once, discreetly.

"Argus here."

"Argus, this is control. We've picked up one anomalous trace in the vicinity. It's currently near the razorhead nest. We can't get a reading on it."

"Understood, keep me informed."

I continued through the vegetation as quietly as possible, but the armour I was wearing really wasn't suited to the task. I sounded like a herd of caribou. I'd know better, next time. Up ahead, the vegetation changed slightly, from a vibrant green to a darker, dusty colour. The ferns weren't standing straight any more, they were hanging limply, looking drained. In the centre of the clearing ahead, a large tree stood clear, much stronger than all the others, with long, hanging tendrils of green vines trailing down into the undergrowth. It was not affected by the decay around it. I'd heard of plants feeding off others, but never like that... I moved closer, being careful not to step on the broken twigs all around me.

The jungle had become dangerously quiet again, and as I looked around, the broken carcass of a razorhead caught my eye near the base of the tree.

My headset beeped again. "Argus, we've lost contact with the unknown, repeat, we've lost contact with the..." a burst of static ended the transmission, and I winced.

I see him. He will not escape this time.

As I approached the tree, I could see that the vines were swaying gently in the breeze, then I realised that there was no breeze. I started feeling nervous. Off to my right, a twig snapped, the sound like a gunshot given the silence preceding it. I span round.

"SSSSSSCCCCCCCCRRRRRREEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAG
GGGHHHHH"

Not again! Suddenly, all hell broke loose. The tree surged to life, lancing down several tendrils where Screech was. Each one smashed into it, knocking it off its feet and to the floor. Screech recovered from its shock and renewed its approach, twisting and mutating to avoid the tendrils, like mercury on a hot plate. I leapt backwards, raising my pistol and putting a few rounds in its general direction. I was lucky. One of them landed, and distracted it for the moment needed for the tree to score a good hit. Screech flew back, landing with a slurp on the floor. I sprinted off, not waiting to see if either of them was going to follow me.

He cannot escape. This was but a small delay. The tree will not always save him.

I fled for a half mile before stopping to take my bearings. According to the monitor the razorhead nest was nearby, but four of the competitors had been eliminated. Unfortunately, to my irritation, Screech wasn't one of them. A soft slurping noise was coming from my left.

I picked my way through the bush, and found a grisly scene in front of me. One of my fellow Killers was spread-eagled out on the floor, quite dead, but surrounded by razorheads, lean quadrupeds with a broad, flat head terminating in a knife-sharp bony ridge that ran the whole length and served as a mouth. If they had been eating her it wouldn't have been so bad, I'd probably have been better with the whole scene, but they were just sitting there with those heads buried into her body. As I watched, the corpse started to shrivel. I guess they were sucking the meat out of it. I raised my pistol and flicked it to automatic.

The first burst cuts two of them down immediately, the others ripped their heads from the body and looked for the source of the attack. The momentary indecision cost two more of them their lives. The remaining survivor darted forward at a terrifying speed, actually evading the burst of bullets I fired at it.

I dropped my pistol, and gripped my sword tightly. It dodged my first stroke, and then leapt, grabbing onto my chest plate and smashing that head into mine. The impact sent me

toppling backwards, and I landed hard. I realised that it hadn't stopped smacking into me the whole way down. I could hear a small crunch as part of the ceramic casing on my helmet went. It was trying to crack my shell and eat me! I reacted instinctively, activated my arm-mounted cannon and put a round in the creature's head.

At that range, the explosion was deafening. I lay there for a second not daring to breathe in case I attracted anything else. After a moment, I made sure that there wasn't anything else in the vicinity, then took off my helmet and checked it. There was a borderline stress fracture on the visor that would go if more force was applied, but it was fine in all other respects. I checked the corpses, and gathered heads. Four kills - I couldn't count the fifth because there was almost no skull left on it. I tied the heads to my belt and reloaded my cannon, then put my helmet back on.

Ahead, through the trees, I could see the Razorhead nest. It was huge. 'City' would have been a better term. There were hundreds of them seething around it, thousands even. There was no way to get in there without suffering a painful death.

Now I have him.

I scaled one of the nearby trees and lurked high above the edge of the nest, trying to see if any of them ever strayed out of the perimeter. I kept an eye on the monitor. Three more Killers were dead, Screech and two others were out but alive, and Preacher had retired on 6 kills. Sensible move, and having seen the nest I'd have done the same, but I wasn't there for the razorheads. Bushmaster was in the lead, on 7.

In the trees on the other side of the clearing, something was twanging my peripheral vision. I looked over, and cut in some telescopic filters. Something was moving through the trees towards me, but some sort of ECM was fuzzing the image.

He sees me. Now I will show him fear.

Whatever it was, it stopped and waved lazily at me. How did it know I'd seen it? I was severely out of my league. There were several thousand razorheads directly below me, and a ghost with stealth coming for me through the treetops. Something made me look down, and I realised that the razorheads in the area had all vanished. I felt better then, for about a second, until I started wondering why.

No escape for you.

I threw a grapple into a tree behind me and swung down to the ground. I tried to keep my landing quiet, but I was more concerned with escape than stealth. I hit the floor running north, and kept going. Far above me, I could hear something tearing its way through the treetops, keeping pace. I snatched a look at my monitor. The base was only a mile away. I kept sprinting, not daring to look back.

Something smashed me to the floor from behind. I rolled with the blow and came up in a defensive crouch, whipping my sword out. The thing was in front of me, also crouched. For all the ten feet between us, I still couldn't see it clearly. I popped my arm cannon again, and tried for a shot at it.

Time seemed to slow down. It dived towards me, under the arc of fire, and swarmed up in front of me, ripping the cannon from my suit. My sword was moving as if I was swinging through treacle. The ghost caught the blow easily, taking my sword out of my hand as an adult might take something from a child. It then thrust the sword through me several times, punching straight through my armour, blazing lines of fire cutting through my chest and stomach. I didn't seem able to move.

Time sped up again, and I collapsed bonelessly to the floor. The thing was standing over me, arms raised high.

Victory.

The world went dark.

A steady beeping disturbed the darkness, and I opened my eyes slowly. I was in a painfully white room. My heart rate seemed steady, and as far as I could tell, I was all in one piece. A powerful core of rage was burning within me. I very much wanted to hit something. I looked around, and saw Johnny sitting in a chair near my bed, reading a small book.

"Alive again, then?" he asked, with a Zen smile.

"Almost," I mumbled through cracked lips.

He smiled, raising himself up from the seat and resting a hand on my shoulder. "They say the first one is the worst lad. You'll be OK."

I tried to nod, but the neck brace wouldn't let me, damn it.

"You should know that there was some excellent footage recovered in the fight. Power Projects are offering a good sum if you'll testify that their armour held you together long enough for stabilisation." He sighed gently. "You'll often find it to be the way. They'll also cover your treatment, rehab, and ongoing Streak costs as well. I'd take it if I were you."

He could see that I was tired, and gathered his things to leave. "All part of the game," he smiled wearily.

"Easy to say that when you're the best player," I said.

His smile faded briefly. "You still have some things to learn, but you'll have plenty of time to learn them in. Something you should be wary of is who's playing and who's not. If I'm good, it's because I don't play the game."

I am the game.

SYSTEMWORKS

“She’s ginger, gorgeous and gay. What’s not to like?”

Greghammer, Human Contract Killer, Rep 3, on WitchHazel.

This chapter provides a number of new rules systems for use when playing SLA Industries, including detailed unarmed combat & martial arts rules, a Signature Move system to model a critical hit in combat, new rules on fear and madness, a number of new skills, and a new racial option for characters. These system extensions are not exclusive to Contract Killers – like Hunter Sheets, high-fashion armour, exotic weapons and just about everything else, they are intended to supplement (or in some cases replace) the current rules set as laid down in the main rulebook for all games, even ones where the word ‘Contract’ never arises from one week to the next. In effect, they are an official patch to upgrade to SLA 1.2. That doesn’t mean that you have to include them, of course. As with all published material, GMs should feel free to mix ‘n’ match between new and old official material and personal house rules.

The GM has the absolute and final right to permit, modify or veto any or all material in this book, no matter what else it says – and that’s official.

MARTIAL ARTS

Given that camera-friendly hand-to-hand fighting is such a vital part of the Contract Circuit, this section offers a detailed unarmed combat system to fully differentiate between the three unarmed combat skills in SLA, Unarmed Combat, Martial Arts and Wrestling. It is completely compatible with the system detailed in the SLA Industries Rulebook, and may be used easily with existing characters. The premise is that ranks in unarmed combat skills allow a character to have trained in one or more specific attack moves with different characteristics.

Each character designs her own fighting style by learning moves from the options below. The player may select one move for each rank that she has in an unarmed combat skill, unless the move is marked with a *, in which case two ranks are required to master it. This selection is done once, at character generation for new

characters, or later, if characters were generated without access to this section. Each new rank of an unarmed combat skill learnt through experience permits a further move to be selected. Certain moves are available to all unarmed combat skills, while others are only available to one or two of the three branches – listed as UC for unarmed combat, MA for martial arts and W for wrestling. If no skills are listed, the move is available to all three skills. If a move's damage score is marked with a +, add your character's STR bonus to the damage.

When selecting your moves, think about the way they fit together. This will affect your character's fighting style, and will affect the impact that she has in the media. People like to see brutal hand-to-hand fighting on their Friday night TV, but they remember grace, too. It is generally assumed that she will have learnt her particular selection of moves from a specific combat school or master who teaches that selection as a style.

Example:

Sanction is a martial artist who uses accurate, well-timed attacks rather than relying on pure brute strength. With a Martial arts skill of 8, his player selects Straight Punch, Snap Kick, Block, Evade and Jab, and starts training in Throw (taking the first half of a two-rank move). Harlequin on the other hand is a brawler through and through. As a Brain Waster with high Enhance he also needs to take his teeth and claws into account. With his Unarmed Combat skill of 8, his player selects Natural Weapons, Punch, Kick, Putting the Boot in, Block, Smash and Choke.

THE MOVES

Punch

An old classic. Swing your clenched fist at your opponent.

DAM	PEN	AD
0+	0	0+

Straight Punch (UC, MA)

A straight-line punch is faster and more accurate than the basic punch, and provides +1 to the Attack Roll.

DAM	PEN	AD
0+	0	0

Haymaker * (UC)

The traditional big swing of the brawler, Haymakers are slow but powerful punches. Successful attacks hit at the end of the phase.

DAM	PEN	AD
1+	1	0+

Kick

Much like a punch, except you're using your foot.



DAM PEN AD

0+ 0 0+

Snap Kick (UC, MA)

Snap kicks are fast, accurate attacks. Generally they are aimed at the legs or lower body, but some side-kicks can easily reach the chin. +1 to Attack Roll

DAM PEN AD

0+ 0 0

Putting the Boot in * (UC, Rank 6+ only)

Like the Haymaker, this is a slow but powerful attack. Traditionally aimed at the groin, but can go just about anywhere. Successful attacks hit at the end of the phase; your next attack is at -1 due to poor balance

DAM PEN AD

2+ 1 0+

Headbutt (UC, W)

A perennial favourite of Frothers everywhere, the headbutt simply requires that you ram your forehead into your opponent. This halves the penalty for aiming at your opponent's head (-2 rather than -4)

DAM PEN AD

0+ 0 0+

Smash * (UC, W)

A powerful attack using the forearm, elbow or knee. Smashes are difficult to block or evade. Any such attempt has a -4 penalty.

DAM PEN AD

1+ 0 1

Natural Weapons

Claws, teeth, tails and tusks are all Natural Weapons, and this move also covers implanted or ebb-grown equivalents. DAM, PEN and AD are all according to the stats of your natural weapon, and STR bonus is added to DAM and AD.

Block

Deflecting your opponent's attack, generally using your arms. A successful block reduces the damage dealt by any one melee attack in the same phase by half. Damage is taken to the blocking limb. No other action may be taken while blocking.

Evade * (MA, Rank 6+ only)

Getting out of the way of your opponent's attack. A successful Evasion negates all damage from all melee attacks in that phase. No other action may be taken while Evading, including movement.

Knockback (MA, W)

Pushing your opponent away, basically. Used mainly to create room for a particularly flashy attack, or for trying to escape. Opponent is pushed back a number of feet equal to your STR bonus and must make a DEX roll to stay standing.

Jab * (MA)

Spear-hand and knuckle strikes are Jabs. Essentially a quick, precise attack focusing its energy on a single point.

DAM PEN AD

0+ 2 0

Trap Weapon (MA)

A defensive manoeuvre that pins your opponent's weapon, usually between your body and your arm. Does no damage, but does not get penalties for called shots, either. See the entanglement rules on trapped weapons in Chapter 9 for information on breaking a weapons entanglement.

Throw * (MA, W)

Throws range from Judo hip-tosses to Wrestling Suplexes, and are used to put your opponent on the ground. They leave your opponent prone. Throws cannot be evaded, but can be blocked.

DAM PEN AD

0 0 1

Lock Hold (W)

Manipulation of a joint in a way it is not supposed to move. Lock holds are very painful and armour is of limited effect against them. Lock holds do no damage and have an effective PEN of 8, but are painfully debilitating and very difficult to break. While caught in a lock hold, a character is at a penalty to all actions equal to his attacker's Wrestling skill. To break a lock hold, a character must make a successful Wrestling, Martial Arts or Acrobatics roll, or a successful Dexterity roll with a penalty equal to the lock-holder's Wrestling skill. While applying lock hold, you may not perform any other action. Only humanoid creatures are affected by lock holds – which includes Carriens, cannibals and scavvies, but excludes vevaphons and Necanthropes, despite the fact that they can be roughly human-shaped from time to time.

DAM PEN AD

0 8 0

Dislocate * (W, Rank 6+ only)

Disassociate bone A from joint B. Must be applied to a limb as a called shot. Dislocate does no damage to Hits, and has an effective PEN of 8. The limb is immediately disabled – i.e. useless – until it is knocked back in using Paramedic or some other medical skill. Like lock hold, this only affects humanoid creatures.

DAM	PEN	AD
0	8	0

Choke (UC, W)

Grab your opponent by the throat and deprive him of blood oxygen by means of strangulation. Choke does bruise damage equal to your STR bonus every round until the choke is broken (see the entangling rules in Chapter 9 on how to break out of a lock) or the victim reaches 0 HP and is rendered unconscious. This bruise damage represents oxygen starvation to the brain through blood deprivation and is not reduced by combat drugs or healed by drugs, Ebb use or regeneration. Points lost are regained as soon as the choke is broken. Damage is applied against the victim's total Hits, rather than a location. While executing a choke, you may not perform any other action. Like lock hold, this only affects humanoid creatures.

DAM	PEN	AD
0+	0	0

Stun * (MA, W)

Striking to wind or daze your opponent. Any action the opponent takes in his next available phase is at -6.

DAM	PEN	AD
0	0	0

In addition to the countless Gyms and Dojos where people train in the common martial arts, the World of Progress contains many old and secret forms of advanced combat. Practised mainly by Humans and Shaktars, all have exacting requirements in terms of skills, conditioning, history and conduct that any potential student must match. Those who can reach their standards can learn rare and deadly moves not found elsewhere.

SIGNATURE MOVES

Signature moves are the critical hits of the SLA Industries combat system – those lovely moments when your opponent over-extends himself and you get to land your favourite attack, free and clear. A critical hit is scored when you roll a double (i.e. both dice reading the same) on a successful attack, at which point your character may apply his signature move to his target.

Contract Killers are that bit better than everyone else when it comes to fighting, especially the bloody close-up work that is so popular with the public. To simulate this, Contract Killers can make their own critical hits rather than simply relying on the luck of the dice. When a Contract Killer makes an attack the player may declare that he is attempting his signature move. To find out if he is successful or not the player makes an attack roll and a Rep roll, both at -6, and attacks against the Killer in that phase are at +4. In order for the blow to be successful, both rolls must succeed.



Signature moves have an added importance for Contract Killers. Most Killers are known for a particular variation of their signature move, called a finisher. These are dramatic and stylish moves, intended to be instantly recognisable by the public, who will often chant the name of a Killer's finisher to encourage him to display it for their adulation. In arena matches – and even sometimes on the streets – Killers will often give particular hand signals to indicate that they are going to attempt their finisher.

The importance of finishers to a Killer's image cannot be overstated, and for this reason they are always heavily protected by copywriters and intellectual property law. Occasionally, when a particularly famous Contract Killer dies or retires, his signature move may be sold on, and a few second-generation Killers use signature moves that they have, as it were, inherited. Usually though, copying someone else's finisher is a sure-fire way to end up in court, in a deadly feud, or just dead.

The signature moves listed below represent the different possible combat effects that a critical hit can result in. Each one can be visually expressed in an infinite variety of finishers, or merely kept as a visually subtle critical hit. Players select one signature move upon character generation, and that is the effect that their critical hits will have in combat from then on. Once selected, signature moves cannot be changed. All combatants benefit from critical hits; if an NPC or monster does not have one assigned, GMs may assume that it is of the 'Big Smash' type. Existing player characters also use a 'Big Smash' critical hit until the player gets round to selecting a signature move.

If you are playing a Contract Killer, you should think about your finisher once you have chosen your signature move. Think of a particular use of the signature move that you think is dramatic and showy, then check it with your GM. A catch name for the fans to chant and the commentators to scream when you deliver your finisher is a good idea too. If you're playing an Operative then there's nothing to stop you developing a finisher, especially if your character hopes to join the circuit one day. You'll still only get to use it on a critical hit, but it's good for showing the character's ambition.

Signature moves can apply to all melee attacks, not just unarmed combat. Finishers that are described as being executed with a particular type of weapon cannot be used without it, though a Contract Killer can still make a successful critical hit or voluntary signature move attempt – it just won't look as good. Armed and unarmed finishers are roughly equal in terms of popularity on Mort.

Example:

Sanction's finisher, which he has named "Bring it on, baby!" is a Spot On signature move executed with his custom Mutilator glove. Sanction turns to face side-on to his opponent, right hand extended and beckoning the Opponent to charge. In a swift,

graceful move, Sanction moves aside and chops hard into his victim's neck. A frequent result is decapitation.

SIGNATURE MOVE TYPES

Big Smash

Big Smashes are all about busting your opponent up. They are used by people whose philosophy is to hit hard and get the blood flowing. Given the public's lust for blood, power moves will never go out of fashion.

Effect: +4 DAM.

Impale

Driving your weapon – or your hand if you're that strong – right through your opponent is a good way to put him down. It looks good for the cameras too.

Effect: +8 PEN.

Rend

Who cares about the guy inside? Prising his armour open can leave him naked and begging at your feet.

Effect: +8 AD.

Dazed and Confused

If your opponent is momentarily incapacitated, then he's open to an array of devastating moves. Viewers love the anticipation that follows an attack resulting in a Dazed and Confused opponent.

Effect: Opponent may take no action in his next phase, not even moving or defending.

Throw-Away

Why just throw when you can throw away? Create some space for a big follow-up attack and land your opponent flat out in one easy move.

Effect: Opponent is thrown a number of feet equal to twice the character's STR bonus and knocked prone.

Impact Strike

Balance is boring? Well maybe so, but when it means extra damage to the target and his armour it's damn effective.

Effect: +2 DAM, +3 PEN, +3 AD.

Jangler

Hit a major nerve group and watch your opponent try desperately to move a body that's no longer accepting orders from Mr. Brain. He's got to know you've got him at your mercy, right?

Effect: +4 PEN, -4 to Opponent's next action.

Spot On

Putting it where you want it. From lopping off limbs to placing a gut-punch that has your opponent throwing up into his helmet, Spot On does exactly what it says on the tin.

Effect: Choose where your blow lands. This need not be a standard location such as arms or head; it can be a smaller specific area such as the shoulder, wrist or neck. Severing of a part or all of a limb with this attack requires an attack with a bladed weapon, and that the attack do damage at least equal to the limb's maximum Hits. To decapitate your opponent, you must strike the neck and do damage equal to the Hits of the head – the head itself is not damaged by this, a useful thing to remember in this era of LAD.

RULES SUMMARY

Your signature move triggers any time you roll a double in a successful attack. It is 'Big Smash' by default, but once you have selected a signature move, you will use that one for ever. The term 'signature move' represents the game effects of your critical hit; its visual element is the 'finisher'. If you are a Contract Killer, you may deliberately use a signature move by declaring your intention to do so then rolling an attack at -6 and a Rep roll at -6. Both rolls must be successful for you to hit at all, but if you do, the hit is a critical.

STRESS

Life on Mort is stressful, even if you're just Joe Civvy glued in front of the vid all day. It's particularly savage for Ops and Killers, who spend their time going up against some of the most dangerous maniacs and situations that Mort has to offer. It's no surprise that pretty quickly everyone gets stressed out one way or another. Stress is a measure of ongoing mental turmoil and aggravation, and replaces the fear system in the main rule book. Being afraid is part of the job, and requires quite a lot of imagination anyway. As such, it's not much of a factor for most Ops and Killers. Stress, however, is more or less ingrained into the system. From the moment you have to start queuing in the BPN Hall to your eventual frustration trying to make Karma understand why you had to blow up their warehouse, working for SLA is one long grinding stress trip. It'll drive you mad just as quickly as fear will, too.

Every PC has a stress level and a breaking point. Stress increases (or occasionally decreases) as time goes by and different events happen. When a character's stress reaches her breaking point, she's ready to snap, and any further stress could send her over the edge. When she does finally fly off the handle, she discharges a whole bunch of her stress in rage, terror or fugue, gaining a degree of insanity in the process, and her stress levels plummet. Once she comes round, she'll be back in control of her emotions – until the next time it happens.

A character's breaking point is equal to twice her Cool. Humans get a special +10 bonus to that, because society is set up chiefly for their benefit, which makes life run that little bit more smoothly. Stress starts out at 0, and is increased and decreased by the events that a character experiences. Stressful experiences come in two forms, automatic and potential. In game terms, automatic stress (AS) is unavoidable. If you experience an event that carries AS, your stress level increases by that amount, and there's no way out of it, not even combat drugs. AS is normally attached to physiological shock and damage, or to highly traumatic events. Potential stress, PS, can sometimes be avoided. If you are in a potentially stressful situation, roll your COOL as a skill (i.e. roll 2D10 and add your COOL), with 20 being the target for success. If you pass the Cool check (or if you are on a combat drug that makes you immune to COOL rolls), you avoid the PS. If you fail, it is added to your stress level.

Once your stress reaches your breaking point, you are in danger of having a temporary breakdown. Every time you are faced with AS or PS – whether or not your stress actually increases – you must attempt a Cool check as described above. This still applies if you are on combat drugs. If you pass the check, you can proceed normally. If you fail, you have a psychotic episode.

The exact details of how your character reacts to a temporary breakdown are down to the GM. The character will either fly into an uncontrollable fury, flee in abject terror and humiliation, or collapse catatonically into her own little dream-world for a bit. Either way, the episode lasts for a number of rounds equal to your stress level – the more you repress your stress, the worse it is when it hits you. In fury, the character will lash out violently at any irritant, starting immediately with the source of the stress, but moving on to anything else available. With terror, the character will run directly away from the source of the stress as quickly as



possible, screaming or sobbing as appropriate, and will be inconsolable while the episode lasts. In catatonia, the character simply sits down and ignores everything and everyone around her. In each of the three options, a DIA roll at -10 is required for a character to notice any lethal danger – no matter how pressing – and to attempt to run away from it. The roll can be attempted once a round, and if it fails, the character remains totally oblivious. A character who is wounded during a breakdown immediately switches to terror and flees from whatever hurt her.

Once the episode wears off, the character loses some of her stress. If she was free to behave as she pleased during her breakdown, she loses a number of stress points equal to her breaking point. If she had to be restrained, forcibly made herself aware of danger or suffered any damage, she loses just half that many points. Either way, her breaking point is reduced by 1 – she'll be slightly more prone to snapping again – and she gains a level of insanity selected by the GM. The GM picks which, but should think long and hard before assigning an acute insanity. Note that these insanities are listed a little further on in this section, and are not the same as the mental disadvantages presented in the main rule book.

Stress can be reduced by a number of different means. Validation through personal achievement is always a good way of reducing your stress, as are breaking things, making love, spending some time in your favourite indulgence, relaxing, or receiving professional therapy. Negative stress points are always absolute – it is difficult (and immensely perverse) to resist feelings of fun, achievement or relaxation. Intensive psychological assistance can also help you to replace lost levels of breaking point. For each fortnight spent in the care of mental health professionals, the character can make a Cool check, and if she passes, she regains 1pt of breaking point, up to original maximum. Note that increasing your COOL through experience does not automatically increase your breaking point.

Stress supersedes the old Fear Roll system in the main rulebook. At the GM's option, any character gaining more than two stress points at a time may suffer from a minor panic, in which he is unable to take any action other than self-defence for a number of rounds equal to the number of stress points gained. As a rule of thumb, old fear ratings can be converted to stress ratings by assuming that every 5 points of fear rating is worth 1 PS, and every 8 points of rating are worth 1AS, but this is by no means a hard and fast rule, and the GM should feel free to convert in a manner that seems appropriate. The example stresses listed below should be considered fit for use by Ops, Killers and other battle-hardened characters; corporates, factory workers and the public are all likely to be more negatively affected in most cases. Stress is related to more than just fear though – gore, helplessness, isolation and weirdness all increase the stress of a situation – so the table below should offer some guidelines:

GAINING STRESS

- Finding a dead body - 1PS
- Meeting a Stormer who hates you - 1PS
- Being interrogated - 1PS
- Coming across a general scary situation - 1PS
- Being made to wait around for more than an hour when you're in a hurry - 1PS
- Being stuck in a traffic jam for hours - 1PS
- Going below Level 5 of Lower Downtown - 1PS
- Finding a lot of dead bodies - 2PS
- Being outnumbered at least 5 to 1 in combat - 2PS
- Losing a ranking Circuit match - 2PS
- Coming across a weird, scary situation - 2PS
- Being the target of a surprise attack on the Street Circuit - 2PS
- Running out of bullets - 3PS
- Running out of Flux - 3PS
- Being outnumbered at least 20 to 1 in combat - 4PS
- Being surprised to meet a Necanthrope* - 1AS
- Taking a dose of Rush** - 1AS
- Taking a dose of UV** - 1AS
- Taking a dose of Pineal Stim** - 1AS
- Taking a dose of Streak** - 1AS
- Taking two or three doses of any KickStart type at the same time** - 1AS
- Taking a dose of White Noise** - 1AS
- Taking a dose of Bass** - 1AS
- Taking a dose of Alice** - 1AS
- Taking a Space-walk - 1AS
- Not seeing any friends for a week*** - 1AS
- Coming across a general terrifying situation - 1AS
- Being portrayed as a loser by 3rd Eye - 1AS
- Being the target of an assassination attempt - 1AS
- Trying to have sex and failing (interruption, impotence, &c) - 1AS
- Being the target of a Covert Game - 1AS each day
- Finding a friend's dead body (per friend) - 1AS, 1PS
- Meeting a Necanthrope who is angry at you* - 1AS, 1PS

Entering a FoldShip - 1AS, 1PS

Not seeing any other members of your race for a week*** - 1AS, 1PS

Going below Level 20 of Lower Downtown - 1AS, 1PS

Meeting a Necanthrope who hates you* - 1AS, 2PS

Losing quarter of your Hits in one blow - 1AS, 2PS

Coming across a weird, terrifying situation - 1AS, 2PS

Killing a bystander, non-combatant or innocent - 1AS, 4PS

Being tortured (per session) - 1AS, 5PS

Losing half of your Hits in one blow - 1AS, 6PS

Failing a BPN - 2AS

Taking a dose of Blaze UV** - 2AS

Being interrogated by Cloak Division - 2AS

Finding a lot of mutilated dead bodies - 2AS, 1PS

Finding a friend's mutilated dead body (per friend) - 2AS, 2PS

Not seeing anyone else at all for a week*** - 2AS, 2PS

Going below Level 50 of Lower Downtown - 2AS, 2PS

Being attacked by a Necanthrope* - 2AS, 3PS

Executing a non-aggressor in cold blood - 2AS, 4PS

Seeing a friend or squad-mate die (per friend) - 3AS

Losing a rank of Rep - 3AS

Losing a limb - 3AS

Taking a dose of Shatter** - 3AS

Taking four or more doses of any KickStart type at the same time** - 3AS

Being in real danger of imminent death - 3AS

Taking a Space-walk with nothing nearby - 3AS

Being the subject of a Hunter Sheet - 3AS

Going into the Cannibal Sectors - 3AS, 3PS

Going to a War World - 3AS, 3PS

Coming across Hallowe'en Jack - 4AS

Disastrously failing a BPN - 4AS

Being portrayed as a subversive by 3rd Eye - 4AS

Being tortured by Cloak Division (per session) - 4AS, 4PS

Seeing a friend or squad-mate tortured to death while you watch helplessly (per friend) - 5AS

Being the subject of a generous Hunter Sheet - 5AS

Killing your lover, parent or child (per loved one) - 5AS, 10PS

Your DeathSuit dying - 5AS, 10PS

Hallowe'en Jack waking you up - 6AS, 6PS

Dying & receiving LAD - 8AS

Mr. Slayer waking you up - 10AS, 20PS

*: +1AS if you are an Ebon or Brain Waster

**: Frothers are not affected by this stress

***: Wraith Raiders are not affected by this stress

GETTING RID OF STRESS

Completing a BPN - lose 1 stress

Winning a ranking Circuit fight - lose 1 stress

Being shown as a winner by 3rd Eye - lose 1 stress

Incapacitating or killing someone who was trying to incapacitate or kill you - lose 1 stress

Destroying at least 100c worth of breakables in one orgy of violence - lose 1 stress

Having sex - lose 1 stress

Taking a dose of Drum* - lose 1 stress

Meditating for an hour** - lose 1 stress

Going into the Pit for recreational purposes** - lose 1 stress

Spending a couple of hours indulging in a hobby without interruption** - lose 1 stress

Spending at least 250c in one shopping spree** - lose 1 stress

Spending 75c on a two-hour session of therapy** - lose 1 stress

Spending an hour – and at least 25c – pigging out on fattening foods*** - lose 1 stress

Getting drunk or stoned**** - lose 1 stress

Destroying at least 100c worth of someone else's breakables in one orgy of violence - lose 2 stress

Having sex with someone you genuinely love - lose 2 stress

* But not when you were going to go to sleep anyway; it has to be a self-indulgence

** Only effective once a day, and requires pleasant surroundings

*** Do this more than twelve times in any one month and you gain half a stone, and lose a rank of Good Body / gain a rank of Bad Body

**** Only effective once a day, and doesn't apply to Frothers

INSANITY

IMPORTANT NOTE. Mental illness in the real world is tragic and horrifying, and blights the lives of sufferers and their families. This section is not meant to be an accurate or clinical representation of mental illness, nor is it intended, in any way, to belittle the agony that it causes. This is a set of rules for use in games of SLA Industries, and attempts only to provide some interesting rules. It is not a psychiatric textbook. Do not use any of the material in this section to try to diagnose, treat or otherwise work with real mental illness.

The result of repeated breakdown is mental illness, a debilitating and horrifying affliction. The feeling of being unable to trust your own mind – not just your perceptions but actually your opinions, beliefs and thought processes – is extremely distressing and isolating. Insanity is not endearing, cute, amusing, or wacky. Those things can only be associated with eccentricities. Insanity is disturbing, distressing and frequently terrifying.

Playing an insane character is a significant challenge, and should not be taken lightly. These afflictions will permeate every moment of a character's life, even mild ones. The prospect of the next attack is a constant fear, and characters will go to great lengths to avoid situations that may trigger their derangement, or that they know they will find difficult to deal with like a normal person. They may well be obsessive about their problem, talking about it a lot or refusing to acknowledge it at all despite the clear and continual disadvantages that it presents. Self-identity often starts with the problem, rather than the person, leaving the sufferer depressed and isolated from the rest of society. Misery is guaranteed.



It's not that difficult to spot the difference between an eccentricity and an insanity. If the problem makes other characters laugh, wince or say things like "Man, you're mad", then it is an eccentricity. If it makes other characters go pale, back away slowly, keep away all together or say things like "Sure, absolutely, I'm sure you're right", then it's an insanity. Ten-foot tall imaginary pink teddy-bear companions are an eccentricity. Sitting in the back of an APC and stabbing yourself repeatedly through the thigh with a stiletto because it's the only way to let the pain out and you can't bear to keep it in any longer is an insanity.

The problems listed in this section are not compatible with the mental disadvantages given in the main rule book, and should be considered as full replacements for them. Players of existing characters with mental disadvantages need to calculate the number of levels of insanity that their current disadvantages represent, and then select that many levels of insanity from the list below. Old mental disadvantages affected are Phobia, Arrogant, Psychoses (psychopathy, sociopathy, delusions, split personality, compulsion, paranoia, perversion, schizophrenia) and General. Each disadvantage ranked 1-7 is worth a sub-clinical insanity and each one ranked 8-10 becomes a chronic insanity. When selecting replacements, players do not need to choose the insanity closest to their old derangement — they can select any from the list that the GM permits. Characters with mental disadvantages worth four or more levels of insanity in total should just select two chronic insanities. Prescribed medication is available – it suppresses all listed symptoms, but gives a -6 penalty to all rolls, so is rarely used.

New characters wishing to take a sub-clinical or chronic insanity as a disadvantage get 10 character creation points per level of insanity, to a maximum of 40 points. Acute insanities may not be purchased as a disadvantage. Note that phobia, arrogance, psychopathy, sociopathy, compulsion and perversion do not have any direct equivalents in this system. Characters may of course be as arrogant, phobic, megalomaniac, compulsive, insensitive, psychotic, perverse or eccentric as a player likes, but they do not get any character creation points as a benefit. These conditions are pretty normal for SLA Operatives, and do not actually confer any particular disadvantage to Ops and Killers. Acute insanities are extremely serious, expose characters to great danger, and hamper play, so a PC should take medication until he can get hospitalisation for a month to have an acute insanity commuted to a chronic one, and may spend a year of weekly therapy sessions (at 75c a week for a two-hour session) to reduce a chronic problem to a sub-clinical one. Only one problem can be worked on at any one time.

INSANITY LIST

Schizophrenia. The big daddy of all insanities, schizophrenia is the disease most uninformed people are referring to when they say "mad". It literally means 'split brain', and at its most simple can be thought of as a core imbalance between what the mind needs

and what the mind receives. There is usually some sort of unresolved pressure on the schizophrenic mind, which forces other areas of the perceptual system out of shape. Schizophrenia often manifests as hallucinations of one sort or another or as difficulty in understanding that an action leads to a consequence. **Sub-clinical** schizophrenia manifests in game terms as a standing penalty of -2 to all DIA-based skills. Rolling a double during a detect roll indicates that the character believes he almost heard or saw something that just managed to avoid his attention. **Chronic** schizophrenia causes regular attacks in which the world seems disjointed and peculiar, and sensory input is unreliable – perhaps even hallucinogenic. This may be accompanied by voices urging the character to perform vile, degrading or personally abhorrent actions. These attacks happen whenever the character rolls 2, 3 or 4 on 2D10, and last for five minutes. During this time, DIA and CONC skills and the Detect skill are unusable. The world seems odd at all times, even between attacks, and DIA and CONC skills are always at -2. **Acute** schizophrenia condemns a character to a hell in his own mind. He is frequently assaulted by cajoling, whimpering, howling voices urging him to self-destructive actions, and experiences hallucinatory constructs so real that he is never sure if the people he is talking to are genuine or phantom. Hallucinations may be negative – he may be convinced that a road is empty even though an APC is hurtling towards him. Attacks occur any time his dice roll comes up even. They last for one minute, and make all action other than movement and self-defence impossible – the sufferer is likely to be clutching at his head moaning, or flailing wildly at things only he can see. Between attacks, hallucinatory images and misunderstandings remain common, and the sufferer may ramble about the things that he thinks he is perceiving. Detect, Stealth and Hide remain permanently unusable, and all DIA and CONC skills are at -4.

Paranoia. At its root, paranoia involves an inflated sense of personal importance. Sufferers believe that everything happening around them is related somehow to themselves, and usually takes on sinister undertones. The world is a bad place for everyone, and paranoids are unable to see the randomness of life. The smallest misfortunes become part of an ongoing campaign against the sufferer. **Sub-clinical** paranoids feel that anyone looking in their direction is looking at them, that anyone laughing within earshot is mocking, and that petty bad luck is the spite of an uncaring universe. They are withdrawn, highly over-sensitive, and spend a lot of time looking around nervously. They are suspicious and unfriendly to anyone they don't know, always looking for a hidden insult or insinuation – particularly when talking to people in Authority. They get a -1 penalty to all skills when in the company of more than three other people (friends and attackers excepted), in crowds, or in front of an audience, and have Charisma-based skills other than Rep capped at CHA-2. **Chronic** paranoia is similar to sub-clinical, but more intense. The character will have a list of 'enemy ringleaders' who he loathes and dreams of working against, and anyone making any critical or angry comment towards him will be added to the list. Any attention will



be a sign of surveillance by 'them'. The character's misfortunes and the injustices of the world will be worked into a set of complicated theories about the evil group responsible for all this suffering. The penalty for being in company rises to -2, and non-Rep Charisma skills are effectively capped at CHA-5, because the sufferer spends almost all the time looking suspicious and angry, and making inflammatory comments. **Acute** paranoia leaves the sufferer utterly convinced that hostile forces are moving against him, all the time. All Charisma skills are unusable, and social interaction is impossible. The paranoid will continually make wild and often meaningless accusations against the people around him, and may take pointless or unnecessary extreme actions in order to protect himself from an imaginary threat – shooting vids to stop them watching, throwing a drink away because it was poisoned, and so on. If someone is rude, insensitive or aggressive towards him, even a friend, he must pass a mandatory Cool check at difficulty 20 or immediately attack to kill with the most lethal force available to him, regardless of consequences.

Multiple Personality Disorder. A tragic syndrome brought about when the sufferer experiences something too traumatic to deal with, and has to create a sub-personality to isolate the pain from the main core. Contrary to the weight of public opinion, the vast majority of MPDs feature little children as the alternate personality. During an MPD attack, the character retreats into becoming a terrified little child, and loses all access to skills and core knowledges. Fighting is impossible, and the only available response to aggression is to cower in terror. The sufferer requires



soothing encouragement from a trusted friend in a peaceful environment to be able to release the core personality before time. Aggressive skills are always at -1. **Sub-clinical** MPD only triggers when the sufferer rolls double 1 on the dice, but the attack lasts until the next time the person wakes up. **Chronic** MPD may trigger any time the sufferer is shouted at, hurt, bullied, or fails a skill roll by more than 5. In any such case, the sufferer may attempt a Cool check with a 20 target to avoid the attack. If she fails, the episode lasts for half an hour. **Acute** MPD requires a Cool check (target 20) any time the sufferer witnesses any violence, scorn or aggression, or fails any roll, and episodes last for five minutes.

Volatility. Usually arising from deep-seated feelings of inadequacy, sometimes with entrenched sociopathy, volatility expresses itself as sudden outbursts of extreme rage. Between attacks, volatiles are calm but withdrawn, dedicating themselves to holding back the anger that constantly burns within. Even so, they can be moody, impatient and irritable, and always get -1 to CHA-based skills. Attacks of rage explode out of the sufferer, who vents his aggression on the triggering object or person, or if that is not possible, on the nearest hittable thing. The sufferer attacks wildly with the most effective weapon immediately to hand, attempting to destroy the target with no thought for consequence or value. Damage for hand-to-hand attacks is at +3, and wounds

– and enemies – are ignored completely, but attacks are made against the sufferer at +6. At the end of each round, the volatile may attempt a Diag Check (DIA+2D10) to snap out of the fit. **Sub-clinical** volatility triggers when the sufferer fails three skill rolls in a row or rolls 5 on any skill use, with a check target of 15, and the sufferer will stop short of using lethal force. **Chronic** volatility triggers when two skill rolls are failed in a row or the sufferer is taunted, and has a check target of 20. **Acute** volatility kicks in on any failed skill roll or any time the sufferer is criticised in any way, and has a check target of 25. Volatiles have been known to attack computers they needed to work at, waiters attempting to serve them food, nearby dustbins, lovers, inconvenient Dark Finders and even brick walls, and may have a pet skill they regularly exercise as a way of resetting their failure count.

Vacillation. Usually the result of trauma associated with responsibility or guilt, this syndrome causes pathological indecision. The sufferer is desperate to abdicate responsibility, will never express a firm opinion, make a commitment or promise, or make any decision unless one option is clearly the superior answer. She will be extremely scared of being left on her own without someone to tell her what to do, and may accept severe submission or degradation in order to keep 'friendly' company available. When apart from friends or allies, all vacillators get -3 to all skills, their speed halves, and their effective DEX is capped to 8, because they are dithering so badly. **Sub-clinical** vacillators suffer no other ill effects. **Chronic** vacillators find even the suggestion of being alone terrifying, and will do their best to surround themselves with people who will provide guidance. They may find it very difficult to make even obvious decisions, and if they have to live alone, will have just one outfit of clothes several times over, and just one foodstuff in the kitchen, so as to narrow choices. When alone, skills are at -5, speed is divided by three, and DEX is capped at 5. **Acute** vacillators will say, do or pay anything to keep a companion with them at all times, and are not capable of taking any independent action unless they make a successful Cool check (target of 25). Aside from that, acute vacillators will do only what they are told to do by whoever is looking after them, and will not even express discomfort or hunger unless asked. If left alone, they become catatonic until someone gives them an order.

Depression. Medical depression is nothing to do with feeling unhappy. In fact, it's to do with feeling nothing. Depression manifests as a grey, disinterested neutrality and lack of enthusiasm. All emotions are blunted, and in severe cases are absent all together. Motivation, love, fear, determination, greed, everything fades away and the sufferer is left unable to really connect with anything at all. **Sub-clinical** depression starts as a lack of interest and initiative, giving Bad Timekeeper R5, Bad Sleeper R5, and -1 to all DEX skills. The depressive will be uninterested, lethargic, de-motivated and probably exhausted. Social relationships will be allowed to atrophy, but if persuaded to

take action or go out to party, the depressive is capable of returning to near-normality for a little while. **Chronic** depressives have no enthusiasm for anything at all, little emotion of any sort, and not much regard for the safety, appearance, hygiene or comfort of themselves or others. Commercial interests will be neglected, and even legal requirements ignored. Bad Timekeeper and Bad Sleeper are at R10, and all physical skills are continually at -1 – they're just too much effort. **Acute** depressives have no emotional engagement at all, and can act suicidally or psychopathically when they can be bothered to do anything. This state is similar to catatonia by boredom, and all skills are at -3. A successful Cool check (target 20) is required to summon enough enthusiasm to begin any course of action, and further hourly checks (target 18) required to avoid giving up before completion. Love, death, pain, even the most pressing instinctive needs mean nothing to them, whether their own or someone else's.

Fantasiist. Driven insane by repeated pain and trauma, fantasists retreat from reality into believing that they somehow possess a charmed life in which everything goes perfectly. Unpleasant events are glossed over, and dangers flatly denied. The GM must secretly track a fantasist's Hits, because the character will refuse to admit wounding, even to themselves. The character will make grandiose plans, dismiss opponents out of hand and generally refuse to admit to any problems. **Sub-clinical** fantasists are perpetually cheerful and over-enthusiastic, have no idea of their own limits, make all sorts of sincere promises that they cannot keep, and have a -1 penalty to DIA skills. **Chronic** fantasists are rampantly egotistical, and will refuse to acknowledge any negative comment or situation. They will be genuinely convinced that they are able to solve any problem, will never ask for help, will resent assistance in combat, and are pathologically stubborn. They get -1 to all skills, because they are certain that they know effective 'tweaks' and 'short-cuts'. **Acute** fantasists repress reality so thoroughly that they have convinced themselves that they are invulnerable to harm. Combat skills are unusable – the sufferer is impervious, so why bother fighting? – and other skills are at -2, and even physical damage will be ignored. Similarly, the sufferer will be certain that he can achieve anything, talk in any way he pleases to absolutely anyone, and do whatever he wants to. After all, his life is charmed.

NEW SKILLS

The skills in this section represent fields of knowledge and ability appropriate to the assorted challenges and opportunities that the Contract Circuit presents. They are not exclusive to Contract Killers however, and can all be learnt by any SLA-trained character during creation or from experience.

Animal Handling (CHA) – This skill covers the capture, care, training, and control of any GM-approved animal, such as a Shahantian Bull. Skilled handlers are be familiar with the hazards and characteristics that a given animal presents, and how to effectively use it. Once successfully 'broken' and trained, which



may take months, an animal can follow simple commands within its capabilities. By default, animals that are excessively headstrong, wild, or stupid cannot be compelled to obey complicated orders and may incur control penalties. Additionally such animals must be regularly retrained lest they revert to an untrained state.

Archery (DEX) – Covers the use of a modern compound bow in battle situations, including training in both range and trajectory issues and in making allowance for weather conditions. Skilled users know how to avoid being wounded by their own bowstring, and know about the different types of arrow available on the market.

Axe (STR) – This skill covers the use of standard utility tools such as hand axes and fire axes in combat as well as the use, techniques, and maintenance of both powered and unpowered battleaxes.

Biofeedback (CONC) – The use of this skill provides a user with an acute control of his body's processes in ways normally accessible only with drugs. This can reduce the effects of panic, fatigue, and drugs, staunch bleeding, minimise the effects of poisons, or manipulate bodily processes such as heart rate or breathing, even to the point of appearing dead. This skill requires several moments of preparation to start but has the side benefit of making the user highly sensitive to their surroundings, granting a temporary +2 to Detect rolls.

Blind fighting (CONC) – this skill covers the ability to engage targets in melee or close-range ballistics combat without the use of sight. Individuals with this skill have honed their senses – and a sixth sense, some claim – to detect targets while blinded or otherwise unable to see. When this skill is used, add the specific combat skill to the user's blind-fighting skill and divide by three, rounding up, to determine the effective skill level.

Contract Circuit Info (INT) – This skill provides the character with in-depth knowledge of the workings of the Contract Circuit. At lower levels, the user is a sports buff with trivial knowledge of major stars, their records, and general rumours. Higher levels give the user an insider's knowledge with access to confidential info on the industry and its operations.

Co-ordination (DEX) – This skill covers various feats of hand-to-eye co-ordination, including weapon juggling, slight of hand tricks, and quick recovery from fumbles. This skill can also be used for all sorts of cosmetic purposes, enhancing an on-camera performance.

Cult Info (KNOW) – This skill provides the user with detailed information on Morr's known cults, leaders, common practices, and beliefs. The user is also familiar with the techniques commonly used to recruit and brainwash new members, and various deprogramming techniques.

Drunken Fighter - [Combat Skill] (CONC) – This skill allows a user to fight effectively when disoriented or inhibited by blind rage, drugs, injury, or alcohol. People skilled in this ability may

substitute this ability for any one combat skill that they also possess, providing that they are suffering from penalties resulting from wounds, weakness, intoxication or other purely internal distractions. The fighter then ignores those penalties. Attacks made while this skill is active appear sloppy and poorly balanced even though they are perfectly effective. Note that this skill may enable a character to be a better fighter when inhibited than when not. Drunken Fighter must be learnt separately for each combat skill that the character wishes to apply it to.

Engineering, Covert (INT) – This skill covers the construction, placement, and concealment of booby traps and snares, both high-tech (bombs, mines, etc) and low-tech (pits, spring traps, etc). The time to prepare and place these items depends upon the complexity of the item and on surrounding conditions as determined by the GM. Generally, it will take five minutes to place, prime and conceal a simple trap. Digging a pit might take several hours. Successful covert engineering is at -10 to detect.

Extreme Violence (DEX) – This skill is often used in conjunction with Telegenics, and allows a user to perform flashy, spectacular attacks. While these attacks do not deal increased damage or offer an improved chance to hit, the results are far more exciting and can impact a user's image. Successful demonstrations of this skill can also be used to intimidate or impress groups of opponents or force an individual opponent to make a stress check.

Flail (DEX) – This uncommon skill covers the use of flails and other multi-segmented weapons to batter and entangle opponents. A side benefit is that skilled users are familiar with the characteristics of the weapon and are more able to defend against them.

High Fashion (KNOW) – This skill provides a solid knowledge of current fashion trends in clothes, armor, and weapons. Skilled users always strive to make the most of their appearance and have the ability to stay in synch with upcoming trends, always remaining on the edge. This skill also grants a passing familiarity with bodily etiquette and allows the user to make a good first impression based upon appearance alone.

Industrial Weaponry (STR) – A rare and specialised skill, this ability represents training in the use of a variety of common industrial and mechanical items for the purposes of battle. It only applies to items that can be carried by a human. This skill does not cover the offensive use of large-scale production-line equipment in a fight – no Industrial Heavy Weaponry courses are currently known of anywhere in the World of Progress.

Shield (PHYS) – Permits the character to make significantly beneficial use of a shield when defending against melee attacks. Use of a shield is considered a sign of weakness by the public, and may harm a Killer's reputation.

Telegenics (CHA) – This skill is similar to acting, but designed for a far larger scale in the modern world. Incorporating stage techniques, method acting, props, and dynamic camera work, a

user plays to the camera and to affect a remote audience. Skilled users have the ability to promote themselves and damage the image and reputation of opponents. This skill is used to look good on camera.

Trick Shot (DEX) – This skill allows a user to perform flashy attacks with a selected weapon, and requires a successful roll and a successful attack if damage to a target is intended. This can include such things as bouncing a knife off a surface into a target, or throwing a weapon not normally designed for the task (i.e. a Power Claymore). The GM is final arbitrator on what actions are possible. Trick shots almost always do at least 2 points of damage less than a normal attack, and sometimes considerably less.

Willpower (COOL) – This skill enables a user to resist the effects of shock, mental ebb attacks, domination, intimidation, torture and drugs, through sheer determination. Requiring intense self-control, it can also negate the effects of depression and low morale.

Xenobiology (DIA) – This skill covers the study and classification of unknown off-world organisms. Common amongst survey/first contact teams and Circuit scouts, this skill gives the user a solid foundation in the physiology and behaviours of known organisms as a basis with which to evaluate and approach an unknown species.

Zero-Gee Manoeuvres (DEX) – This skill allows a user to operate within a weightless environment without penalty. Most people are completely lost without gravity, and any attempt to manoeuvre without this skill may send the character into an uncontrolled spin. Skilled users also have an understanding of manoeuvring devices, basic airless environment survival, and emergency procedures.



ADVANCED CARRIENS

QUOTE: "What's the matter? You look a little pale there. I get it; you saw the expensive clothes, the sponsorship logos and the custom Mangler, and you thought you'd get an unexpected interview with a successful Operative. Didn't expect to see one of my kind did you? It's okay my dear, go ahead. Carrien. There. It's a small word, easy to say. Let me guess what got you confused – it's the lack of a hockey stick, right? We're not all like that, believe me. Some of us have evolved. We've caught up with the other races, and working for the biggest power around seems sensible. There's only a few of us of course, but our numbers are increasing. It takes a little getting used to, going from vermin to be shot on sight to respected company asset, but it is definitely worth it. If only to see the look on you people's faces. Sooner or later, you'll realise we're everywhere. I guess you'll just have to hope we don't take all those attempts to exterminate us seriously."

INSIGHT: You were born in the darkest shadows of Mort, hidden underneath decayed machinery and broken sewer pipes. Your first few years were spent running with the pack, scavenging for food and water wherever you could find it. You quickly learnt that there were many threats, many opponents who would try to kill you simply for who you were. As you hunted your prey and battled hard to survive you started realising that you were different from your brethren, smarter, more dangerous – more threatening to the Greaters. Where others were content with their existence, you wanted more out of life. You had that insight that told you to look elsewhere. And as the pack moved on to new hunting grounds you set off on your own to find your true calling.

Wandering through the territories, you headed towards the surface. You knew that the surface dwellers often caused trouble for your kind, but you wanted to learn more about them. Your only encounters with them had been with their warriors, fighting running battles through your territory as they tried to destroy your kind for some unfathomable reason. Even those who were not fighters still used tools that could hurt you from a distance. Using your stalking skills, honed by countless hours of hunting, you learnt how to observe the surface dwellers at rest. From days spent watching and studying them, you taught yourself the language as well as how they acted around each other. Where the majority of your race relies on strength and cunning, most of the surface dwellers relied on devices and other creatures to guard them. You realised that to survive like they did you would have to adopt similar skills, adapting yourself to always stay one step ahead of the rest of your opponents.

As you observed the surface dwellers you quickly became aware of the vids. Always on in every household, they claimed to portray events happening throughout the planet. Not interested in its contents, you instead remained fascinated by the ability of the surface dwellers to watch it continuously for hour upon hour. It was purely by chance that you saw a fellow Carrien on the screen

one day. Rather than the typical image of your brethren being hunted and cut down, this Carrien was dressed smartly like a surface dweller and appeared to be safe from those with guns around him. Listening to his words he explained that he had once been a scavenging Carrien but that Mr Slayer had welcomed him with open arms in to his Big Picture. You discovered that you would be welcomed into the arms of the company if you could explain in the surface talk that you also wanted to help Mr Slayer. It took you several months to eventually decide to risk it, but you haven't looked back yet.

BACKGROUND: Although small in number, the Advanced Carrien are starting to make their mark in the World of Progress. Being bought up in traditional Carrien packs, Advanced Carrien are first identified by their curiosity of things around them. Whereas the majority of the pack lives simply to survive to the next day, the Advanced Carrien question the way things are done. This often leads to trouble within the pack and so they are often forced out by wary Greater Carrien or impatient Mutant Carrien. As they stalk the depths of Downtown and the Cannibal Sectors the Advanced Carrien quickly adapt to survive, learning how to be stealthy and cunning in their attacks.

During the time spent isolated, and because of a desire to fit in to a society somewhere rather than being an outcast, Advanced Carrien often start to study human nature, watching the inhabitants of Downtown from a distance. As they start to get a feel for how the rest of the World of Progress acts, a realisation dawns that they too could become a part of it. Ever since the first Carrien fought in Downtown GoreZones, the World of Progress has slowly started accepting that some Carrien are more than just vermin. When the first Advanced Carrien appeared on the Contract Circuit, sensation-seeking financiers established the legal rights of these new arrivals. They were eager to determine ways of making money from the probably sponsorships. Within just a few months these legal rights were amended so that Advanced Carriens could identify themselves to specific SLA officials and gain a Department of Psychology and Psychosis certificate proving that they were now company assets. This qualifies an Advanced Carrien to enter the Circuit, or to start Operative training. The only real test of their intelligence is whether they have mastered the ability to talk. Everything after this is just paper work. Although Advanced Carrien are rare, their numbers are now growing swiftly, almost as if many have been waiting to first see how their fellows are treated before revealing themselves.

Life in SLA Industries is often hard for the Advanced Carrien. Most of society still thinks of them as a pestilence that should be destroyed. The Advanced Carrien seem to take this in their stride, using their innate survival instincts to remain one step ahead of any real problems. They are used to looking after number one first, and so can seem rather guarded as they try to adapt to being in the middle of those who have always been their enemies. When unsure of how to act they remain quiet and hidden, keeping themselves out of the way whilst observing how others act in

similar situations. In verbal matches Advanced Carrien tend to be derisive and sarcastic, baiting their opponents as much as possible. Their command of Killan is uncannily good. Lesser and Mutant Carrien are terrified of their Advanced brethren, and Greater Carrien find them infuriating.

To survive in combat, the Advanced Carrien has had to develop quick thinking and an advanced awareness of its surroundings, even compared to other Carrien. As they have often previously come up against opponents who could defeat it in a straight fight, Advanced Carrien learn how to use anything and everything they can to their advantage. Most Carrien will watch for any signs of weakness that the opponent shows against others. To allow for their unparalleled tactical ability, Advanced Carrien are the only creatures that select two different signature move types on generation, and they may choose between the two whenever they make a critical hit.

APPEARANCE: Hairless and skeletal the Advanced Carrien is similar in appearance to a normal Carrien. With slender shaped heads tapering to incisor filled jaws, they are a frightening sight. Their rough tongues are often seen licking over their teeth, although whether this is to clean them or to intimidate people is uncertain. Yellow eyes make a strong contrast against the pale skin, darting about continually as the Carrien looks for threats. Sensitive to bright lights, their eyes are adapted to seeing in low light conditions and can even recognise movement in almost complete darkness. Just below their eyes, their nasal cavities are directly open, as if they have had their noses sliced off.

The average Carrien is similar in height to a Frother, standing on average 1.8m tall. Their frames are trim, with wiry muscles and little signs of body fat. Female Carrien also have a low body fat ratio, making it difficult to distinguish between the sexes. Very few Advanced Carrien would ever allow themselves to become overweight, knowing that the extra mass would slow them down too much. Their skin colour is normally a pale grey or sickly white, although it can darken, especially if subjected to sunlight. The skin is almost always hairless, and feels cool to the touch. Hands and feet end in claws.

Like other Carrien species, there is a chance of minor mutation right the species. If present, this will normally be subtle, such as an extra digit on a hand, or a patch of bone showing through the skin. Occasionally, small horn-like protrusions will appear on the surface of the head, or elbows may taper into spurs. All of these effects are purely cosmetic and do not give the mutated Advanced Carrien any real advantages or disadvantages.

INTERACTION – Advanced Carrien on:

Humans: "Extremely versatile creatures. Go very nicely with a light, creamy sauce. Rump, belly and flank are the best cuts. The taste has been compared to carnivorous pig, but don't let that put you off. A timeless classic, however you prepare them."

Frothers: "Volatile, liable to sudden explosion due to chemical imbalance, so stand well back during cooking. Often taste rancid, and a few may even have pharmaceutical effects. Avoid the liver, spleen and kidneys due to risk of serious toxicity. Come in many colours, which can be useful for creative recipes."

Ebons: "Insipid, pale little things. Not really worth the effort. Most of the meat is too milky on the tongue. Calfs, biceps and brains have the most flavour. Somehow dissatisfying; finish one and you'll be hungry again in half an hour."

Brain Wasters: "Unpredictable, with a bitter aftertaste and a gritty texture. Best reserved for when you're serving a wine that has a powerful flavour of its own."

Shaktars: "Reliable. A good choice if you don't mind the time it takes to clean the scales off first. The meat is white when cooked, and tastes almost exactly like chicken."

Wraith Raiders: "Quick and easy, they're so slender that they cook through in no time at all. Properly done, the meat is delicious and juicy, but you have to be careful not to overcook them. Be patient and keep the heat down and you'll find it worthwhile."

Stormers: "Big and strong, so one goes a long way at a party. The meat has an interesting aftertaste, harking back to greener, more pleasant times. Economy-minded cooks may like to keep one staked out in the fridge and slice chunks off when necessary, secure in the knowledge that the meat will have regenerated by the following morning."

Xeno: "Resilient. Well armoured, so peel before preparation, or have a really good carving knife ready. They can take a lot of heat without desiccating, so they are perfect for recipes where spices are to be cooked into the meat. As a bonus, you get a lot of eyes per head to share with everyone. The ideal pilaf"

Chagrins: "Thick and muscular, so they're perfect for cutting into steaks. There's a lot to them, and you can easily get a forty-person barbecue out of one. They have a faintly sulphurous aftertaste, so charcoal is a good cooking method anyway. Don't forget to invite the neighbours round!"

Vevaphons: "Thoroughly unpleasant. The meat is gelatinous and without structure, rather like one gigantic DAC liver, and it's rotten to the core. Can leave a very sour taste in the mouth. On the other hand, they do come pre-boned and ready for slicing, so they can be useful as a handy sandwich filler. Just make sure you have a strong seasoner ready. Watch out for drug ampules, SCL cards and other bits and pieces inside the carcass."

SYSTEM NOTES

Characteristics: STR 5-12, DEX 5-10, DIA 5-12, CONC 5-9, CHA 5-10, COOL 5-8

Racial Skills: Unarmed Combat (STR) 1, Evaluate Opponent (DIA) 1, Tactics (DIA) 2, Survival (KNOW) 2, Detect (CONC)



1, Intimidation (DIA) 1. All Operative and Contract Killer Advanced Carrien receive two signature moves, which they can choose between when they get a critical hit. This reflects their ability to utilise an opponent's weaknesses.

Movement: Walk 1, Run 3, Sprint 5

Encumbrance: $17 + (2 \times \text{STR}) / 34 + (4 \times \text{STR}) / 68 + (8 \times \text{STR})$

Height: Minimum 1.65m, Average 1.8m, Maximum 2.0m

Weight: Minimum 50kg, Average 65kg, Maximum 72.5kg

Claws: DMG 1, PEN 1, AD 0

Disadvantages: Bad Vision 3 (sunlight), Bad Rep 5 (almost everyone)

Advantages: Good Vision 3 (night vision), PV 3 (hide), Good Luck 2

Advanced Carrien can make use of Finance Chips, LAD and all human-compatible Nuke Tendon Implants.

KILLERS IN PLAY

Contract Killers may have a cold, calculating, showman's approach to the Circuit, or may be out for as much bloodletting as they can get. How the Killer is focused and played will drive a lot of the encounters they may be involved in; professional Killers will not get involved in street brawls to increase their street rep, nor will they sign up to more than one 'death match' a week, knowing the odds eventually will beat them. Blood-crazed lunatics on the other hand, who use the Killer vocation to indulge their deranged cravings and fight anyone anywhere, may be looking to sign up to as many death matches as possible, pushing their luck until it either runs out or worse...

IMPACTING THE OPERATIVE LIFESTYLE

All of the rules and characters in this Sourcebook are meant to compliment all the published material for SLA Industries in the main rulebook (MRB), Karma and Mort. Where there are seeming contradictions, either in background or altered rules mechanics, we feel that the rules in this book are more fun and replace the old material – hence the SLA 1.2 designation – but the GM and her flavour of World of Progress will be the ultimate arbiter.

The focus for the Contract Directory is the Contract Circuit, the workings behind the scenes, the Killers themselves and the backdrop of society that demands their existence. The World of Progress is a dark, sinister, brooding environment, where Contract Killers are just another product of a world controlled by SLA Industries. Don't be afraid to introduce Killers in to your game, or take what you want from this sourcebook – the expanded Martial Arts system for instance – and drop it, wholesale or piece by piece, in to your World of Progress.

The key feature of the Contract Killers life – violent encounters against well matched adversaries – means that the characters' lives may be short lived. Players must be prepared for this, and the GM should not shy away from killing characters if that's the way the game goes.

Contract Killer games may involve a lot of combat. Both GM and Players alike need to be thoroughly familiar with the combat system, along with any 'house rules'. Contract Killers have different motivations and goals than other Operatives. The quickest way to introduce the Contract Circuit to your games, and the best way to explore this violent yet glamorous side to the World of Progress in depth, is to have all the Players take on the role of Killers. Running as a 'pack' will allow them to game

together and co-operate in the advancement of their Killers career. Some Killers actually have psychoses and derangements that means they want a life of relentless violence, bloodshed and death, with little thought for greater understanding of either SLA Industries or the World of Progress at large.

With other Killers, the situation is more versatile. The Circuit doesn't have to be about just violence. It can be a highly subtle and political arena in which the characters find themselves trying to cope with shifting alliances, peculiar mysteries and weird situations, no information, deadly enemies, secret missions, distant worlds, rock and roll lifestyles, constant surveillance, humiliating merchandising and overwhelming corruption.

There are all sorts of tales and adventures lurking within the Circuit, waiting there for you to reveal them. Don't be blinded by the fighting – it's not really about the blood. It never has been. There's far more to do within the Contract Circuit than just trying to make it big – although that's fun too. Never forget the assorted compulsory duties that sponsors and SLA will hand down. Life in the Circuit can get real exciting real quickly, and it may be that the only warning you get of a suicide mission coming your way is when a Runner you helped once tips you the nod.

The Killer lifestyle can be hectic, overwhelming, great, terrifying, slick, cool, sly or repressive – but it should never, ever be boring.

KILLER CAMPAIGNS

Staged street skirmishes between Contract Killers are rare, and usually result from long held grudges that come to the surface in a chance encounter. A Killer can help 'stage' such meetings by taking on hated enemies at merchandise signings, mall openings and the like, where there will at least be some media presence. The truly psychotic Killer will prowl the streets in between Circuit gigs, looking for trouble, trusting to their luck for coverage.

"I fight on camera and for money. Killing's my business and business ... is ... good. Heh, heh, heh."

Kraft, SCL 8C Xeno Contract Killer.

There are occasions when two heads (or more) are better than one (and not just on a Mutant Carrien) forcing the formation of Killer teams. These teams, akin to Cohorts, will act as a focused unit, furthering the careers of all involved. Matches, events and street circuit meets will be undertaken as a team, playing to the Killers strengths, often involving combined Hunter Sheets or appearances in shows such as Gorezone as the only participating Killers (one of the 'Holy Grails' of bookings for an Agent to achieve).

Teams also undertake Hunter Sheets revolving around 'sanctioned' targets such as Soft Companies and cults, working with the Circuit media to bring the bloody confrontation to the public's attention. These hunts can be at the request of a SLA

Dept. or even a Squad close to the completion of a BPN where they lack the muscle to finish their target off.

"Yeah sure, I work with Contract Killers when the need arises. They aint too crazy. Mostly they're hard working, reliable professionals who know how to get the job done. Mostly. Of course... there are some complete nutters out there too... but hey! The same could be said of Ops, right?"

Paul 'Screwdriver' Munxton, SCL 6A Operative with FruitShoot.

Ongoing campaigns with Killer characters should revolve around Circuit events and games, both in arenas and on the street. Killers should always operate in media friendly environments, making sure their coverage is not going to be hindered, looking for ways to raise their profile, pushing their style and attitude down peoples throats until they establish themselves as a sought after commodity on the Circuit. Finding the right agent and booking agency, making sure they are the right Class, getting distinctive arms and armour, teaming up with a good set of 'stable-mates', establishing a network of contacts in SLA Depts. as well as within Third Eye and the media world, should all keep them busy in between gigs.

"I know, I know what you're thinking... you thought 'Hey, fuck it, I can't be arsed with all this investigation crap! Just give me something to kill!'. You jacked as an Op, got your exemption certificate, maybe you really were a little crazy, but you figured it



was worth it, just to get out of the rat race, and in to some good, honest, bloodletting work. But then it starts, with the forms, and the management, and the agents, and the appearances, and the media circus bullshit. And suddenly you're as trapped as you were when you were a regular Slop, only now you put your ass on the line twice a week and you can't think of anything except the next kill. Welcome to the wonderful world of the Circuit."

'Mad Max', commiserating with a fellow Killer in the Jade Onion bar.

Try to keep the Killer focused on the Circuit, concentrate on the surrounding media / showbiz / celebrity circus. There is more to life than arena fights and street match-ups, other obligations to uphold, and their agent is always piling on the bookings. Merchandising deals need meetings to sign contracts and OK product, photo shoots for promotional adverts, meeting the corporate lackeys of the sponsoring companies, just to spice up their dreary lives, doing 'favours' for well connected sponsors. All this outside of making sure the Killer has somewhere secure to live, that those they know are not endangered by their contact with the Killer. Getting weapons and armour customised, trying it out, tweaking it, practising signature moves, training to keep sharp. Then there's the business of keeping their eyes and ears open, and it is a business, with street connections needing to be maintained, as well as corporate palms to be greased, and SLA Industries, although no longer a direct primary driver in their life, is still there, everywhere in the background, pulling the strings, always watching for the Killer who learns too much, or gets too popular.

Sometimes, when the strain of towing the line with SLA Industries is too much for an Operative, they seek the release of aggression through the Killer circuit. Some of the more extreme, seemingly insane Contract Killers are in fact covert Operatives. Acting as 'independents' on shows where they can get a direct booking, or working sporadically for some of the shadier agents. They maintain their cover and anonymity with their infrequent appearances, their hooded or masked costumes, and their ability to disappear from the scene once the cameras are off.

"Sure I suspected that Orion was a Killer on the quiet, I mean he used to disappear for a couple of days at a time, sometimes he'd come back with real bad scars, or broken and replaced weapons, and then he would always seem to have money to spend. Yeah sure, the tattoo on his head saying 'Kil to Live' was a bit of a give away... hey it's easy to be a smart ass with hindsight."

Theresa 'TinyTears' Mansun, SCL 9D Operative with HardCore, BPN de-brief.

GLAMOUR AND GRIND

"I'm a professional! I can't work with these people! They have no sense of style, no attitude, no camera presence, nothing! Children, animals and Ops..."

Protestations of Hannibal, SCL 9C Killer, to his agent on being assigned a 'clean up' Hunter Sheet in conjunction with a squad's Blue BPN.

"Frikk'n' primadona's. It took us nine days of hard slog to track those NightShift scum down, nine frikk'n' days! And this chump slides in at the end, kills a couple of Props. and suddenly he's a frikk'n' hero! I tell ya, they just skate on the surface, all glitz and frills, while we wade around in the shit. But hey, I'm not bitter... like fuck I'm not!"

John 'Hooker' Murphy, SCL 7C Operative with In For The Kill ('IFTK')squad.

When Contract Killers and Operatives do work together it usually happens in one of three ways:

Operative Squad with solo Killer: Perhaps the most common form of contact Ops will have with the Contract Killers. The partnership can be brought about for a variety of reasons; the Killer may work a turf the Ops need to travel / conduct business in, the Killer may have a skill the Ops need to complete the BPN, i.e. be the element of muscle they lack for the coup de grace, both parties may find it mutually beneficial, the Ops through increased coverage and raised profiles, and the Killer through a healthy paycheck and maybe a favour gained from the Ops or SLA Industries.

BPN Ideas: Investigation falls within the Killers home turf, a district they are particularly familiar with, Ops gain help in dealing with enemy found in district. Emergency response could bring them to the Killers 'rescue', or vice versa, as the squad are caught in the middle of a gang / Soft Company war. Mundane Blues or Yellows could find the Killer 'tagging along' as the Ops attract some media interest during their routine assignments.

Circuit connections: The Ops could be brought in on an investigation / retrieval mission by one of the media companies, having the Killer assigned to them as body guard for the duration of the BPN. A squad could be assigned on a 'corporate BPN', acting as guards and escorts for a camera crew and Killer on a reconnaissance mission for an event or Hunter Sheet.

Solo Operative with Killer pack: A solo Op may run in to a Killer pack on their BPN or hire them for it's completion. Solos can also aid the Killer pack with covert investigations, where the pack needs to dig deeper but cannot itself afford to be seen finding out too much. SLA punishes those Killers who break the strict need to know ruling over the Circuit. Solo Ops are, by nature, loners and do not generally work well as part of a team, this may bring it's own problems, as will the Killers generally arrogant attitude and dismissive nature towards Slops. Unless there is a clear benefit for both parties, the partnership is doomed to early failure.

BPN Ideas: The Op may call for assistance at the close of an investigation, to tie up loose ends, or they may need an escort through a dangerous Sector, using the Killers as shields and body

guards. The Op could effectively 'sponsor' the Killer pack, paying them to take out any group they can't handle themselves, be this a gang, Soft Company, Cult, etc. This can either be a more covert operation or a full on media circus.

Circuit connections: The solo Op can be a useful tool for both media companies and agents to hire, investigating anything from proposed territory and it's gang / Soft Company connections, to tracking and recovering missing equipment (especially if it contains footage), or even investigating a Killer....

Operative Squad with Contract Killer pack: In times of great need, or where the opponents are simply too hard, there may be an unholy alliance of Op squad and Killer pack. The assembled egos are prone to arguing and internal conflict, with neither side willing to back down in shows of bravado and self importance, the added media interest makes these games all the more dangerous. If driven by a BPN, it will be a mass encounter with a mob enemy such as a cult, Soft Company or gang. if driven by the Circuit, it can be clearing an area for an 'event' or covertly tracking and recovering some equipment or personnel, where the Ops do the digging, the Killers the confrontation and slaughter.

BPN Ideas: Emergency response to a common enemy, the Ops could be responding to a Red while the Killer pack is on a Hunt. A Silver could involve the Ops securing an area for a promotional appearance by the Killer pack, which can turn in to a melee with another pack launching a strike.

Circuit connections: The Killer pack could be assigned to sweep and clear an area for the Ops to move in and investigate / retrieve from. Expeditionary could even be off world, with the pack being assigned as muscle on a Green , or even a Jade where the Ops have a lack of firepower.

However they interact, there is often tension between Ops and Contract Killers.

Ops may feel Killers are merely muscle, acting as nothing more than combat clowns to distract the tired populace from the dark goings on in the world around them. Treating the Killers as a distraction will annoy them intensely.

For their part, Killers will revel in their high profile life style, playing to the gallery whenever they have a chance, shoving their attitude in the faces of the Ops at every turn. The glamorous lifestyle, the adoring fans, the media coverage, apparently easy money and street cred. of the Circuit makes it easy for the Killers to be arrogant.

Clashes will extend to all areas of operation when the two are thrown together, especially as the Killers do not wish to know too many details of any ongoing investigation, and will actively avoid finding things out or sharing information.



Name: Azif Jeek**Crime:** Subversion. Poisoning of SLA employees, Indirect deformation of character of VIPs**Description:** Short rotund gentlemen wearing white shirt, pinstripe trousers, Black waist-coat, a red brimless hat, glasses.**Profile:** Mr Jeek runs a party and costume supply shop in Uptown sector 6. He is a subversion agent working for an as yet unidentified organisation. His motivations are unclear however he has been very manipulating of the SLA employees using his services. Possible pharmacist/ toxicology talents. Caution against such chemicals is advised.**Connections:** Unknown - believed Dark night**Location of Target:** The Costume Shop, Sector 6

Notes: Over the last few years, using his famous Party supply shop as cover, he has worked his way into Uptown high society. Recent visits to this establishment by SLA employees have been connected to strange hallucinations. It is thought that these are due to contamination of the costumes by some psycho active substrate. Probably a drug of some kind.

Though many of these incidents have been minor the momentary insanity of Operative Daniel Ben at the premier of "Wishful Thinking" - and the resulting death of 16 other VIP's attending the event - has raised the priority of this agent.

Due to the high profile nature of the victims of these poisonings, and the bad publicity surrounding the hallucination triggered attack, live broadcast of the punishment of this agent is essential. Obvious proof of guilt as part of the broadcast will earn a 200c bonus.

Bounty: 600c + Possible bonus

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Name: Dr Richard Barnard**Crime:** Soft company involvement.**Description:** Short, red curly hair, speaks with a stutter.**Profile:** Main technical advisor to Arch. Believed trained by Darknight. Rumoured to be mechanical and electrical genius. Though target himself is thought to have little combat abilities he is rumoured to be guarded at all times.**Connections:** Arch. A relatively new soft company, believed to be supplying advanced tech and equipment to props and skin trade.**Location of Target:** Arch manufacturing/ storage facility, Lower Downtown sector 2978.

Notes: Facility is the main storage and manufacturing unit for Arch Records suggest the building is an adaptation and extension of an abandoned Augustus factory reported in same location in SLA archives. Augustus construction sites of this era typically consists of numerous smaller structures dealing with sub assemblies, inter-linked by under floor and over head conveyer systems.

Accommodation blocks for staff on upper stories. Development and Lab facilities for this particular unit were in the south west quarter of the structure. During operation factory was served by a dedicated Gauss line.

Good footage of the destruction/ disruption of soft company facilities during this operation will earn substantial bonus payments: 100c per item for Arch equipment/ facilities. 350c for graphic combat footage with Arch sponsored props. Bonus payments not dependant on death of target.

Expect resistance from employees and Props on site. Reputation of target suggests possibility of none standard experimental weapons and equipment at location.

Bounty: 200c

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Name: Sear**Crime:** Unauthorized interrogation and termination of SLA employees**Description:** 2.1 m tall, black Super Deathsuit, Gorecannon**Profile:** Necanthrope. DS trained, highly-trained in Ebb abilities. Suffers from delusional schizophrenia**Connections:** none.**Location of Target:**

Notes: Sear is a 122-year-old Necanthrope classified as rogue after he tortured and killed a squad sent to question him. He is delusional, claiming that they were <D-Notice> in the service of <D-Notice>.

Prior to entering the White, Sear was a brash KMS-trained brainwaster with an exemplary record on high profile missions. Upon exit, his demeanor was pensive and he specialized in cerebral assignments involving the apprehension of serial killers. It was discovered that after a subject was detained, he often spent hours or days interrogating them, often dissecting their mental processes. No action was taken since this eccentricity did not interfere with his performance.

In recent weeks, Sear's actions have become more extreme and his interrogations far more violent. After he terminated four SLA employees without permission, Dark Lament officials dispatched an envoy with a summons to explain his actions. When the messenger was found tortured to death, an operative squad was issued a Jade BPN to apprehend him, but met the same grisly fate.

Sear should be engaged with extreme caution due to his master-level Ebb abilities and proven willingness to use these against SLA employees. Although he is skilled with Red Thermal and Gorecannon, he tends to specialize in Communication and Healing often leaving his victims hopelessly insane or Soul-Caged empty husks.

Bounty: 4500c

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Name: Jacob Coy**Crime:** High Treason**Description:** 1.87 meters tall, 89.8 kg. Short spiked red hair, fair complexion, tattoos**Profile:** KMS trained, ex- SLA operative turned DN Enforcer**Connections:** Darknight, Skinny Puppy**Location of Target:**

Notes: Coy was a talented KMS operative assigned to infiltrate Skinny Puppy but dropped out of contact two months ago and was assumed dead. He resurfaced recently in a Channel Resistance anti-SLA ad campaign and is credited with the termination of nine prominent operatives and four Contract Killers. Coy is suspected of organizing a series of assassination attempts against prominent SLA personnel, including Cmdr. Cradle and Dr. Hagen of Karma. His is a required Ultraviolent termination, footage to be broadcast live and direct.

Coy is the suspected leader of an aggressive Darknight cell known as "Reverence Flame" that is engaged in a campaign against local Shivers. This cell is based in tenements along Beacon Street and has a membership between twelve and twenty-five members. All are considered veteran combatants and may be terminated at the Contract Killer's discretion. A bonus of 500 cr is available if the cell is destroyed and their arsenal confiscated.

Coy also maintains strong connections to Skinny Puppy and freelances as a troubleshooter. If engaged while in the company of skin traders, he will have an escort of no less than a half-dozen veteran soldiers. These combatants may also be terminated at the Contract Killer's discretion. A bonus will be awarded for the rescue of any kidnap victims.

Bounty: 1200c Ultraviolence kill bonus available.

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Name: Sgt. Maryanna Flynn**Crime:** Arms trafficking, body chop operations**Description:** 1.89m tall, 90.2 kg, short black hair, blue eyes, scars**Profile:** Dante veteran, combat medic specialist. Sociopath**Connections:** Chop Plop N Shop, KT, Johannas.**Location of Target:**

Notes: Flynn served three tours with SLA's 3rd Nitro legion and returned to Mort with honors, only to vanish into Downtown. She initially sold her services as a Prop, but soon exploited her military connections and created a supply network that places SLA weaponry in the hands of Mort's largest gangs (KT, Johannas). This connection must be severed immediately by removing her from the picture.

Flynn is also the founder and director of a soft company called "Chop Plop N Shop" that specializes in body part resale. While a considerable amount of supplies come from Skin Trade connections, most come from within her primary base of operations. Flynn openly operates from within Trauma Ward #3 of Mercy Hospital in Downtown where patients are exploited for spare parts. Additionally, she employs bag teams to prowl the streets looking for donors in the form of transients. This hospital is considered to be the best area to stage an attack against her.

Flynn, a combat medic by trade, should be considered a hard target since her combat skills and equipment are on par with any other Dante veteran. She is known to regularly wear either PP8 or Crackshot armor and carries a FEN Warmonger or Power Reaper in addition to an array of melee weapons.

Bounty: 1550c

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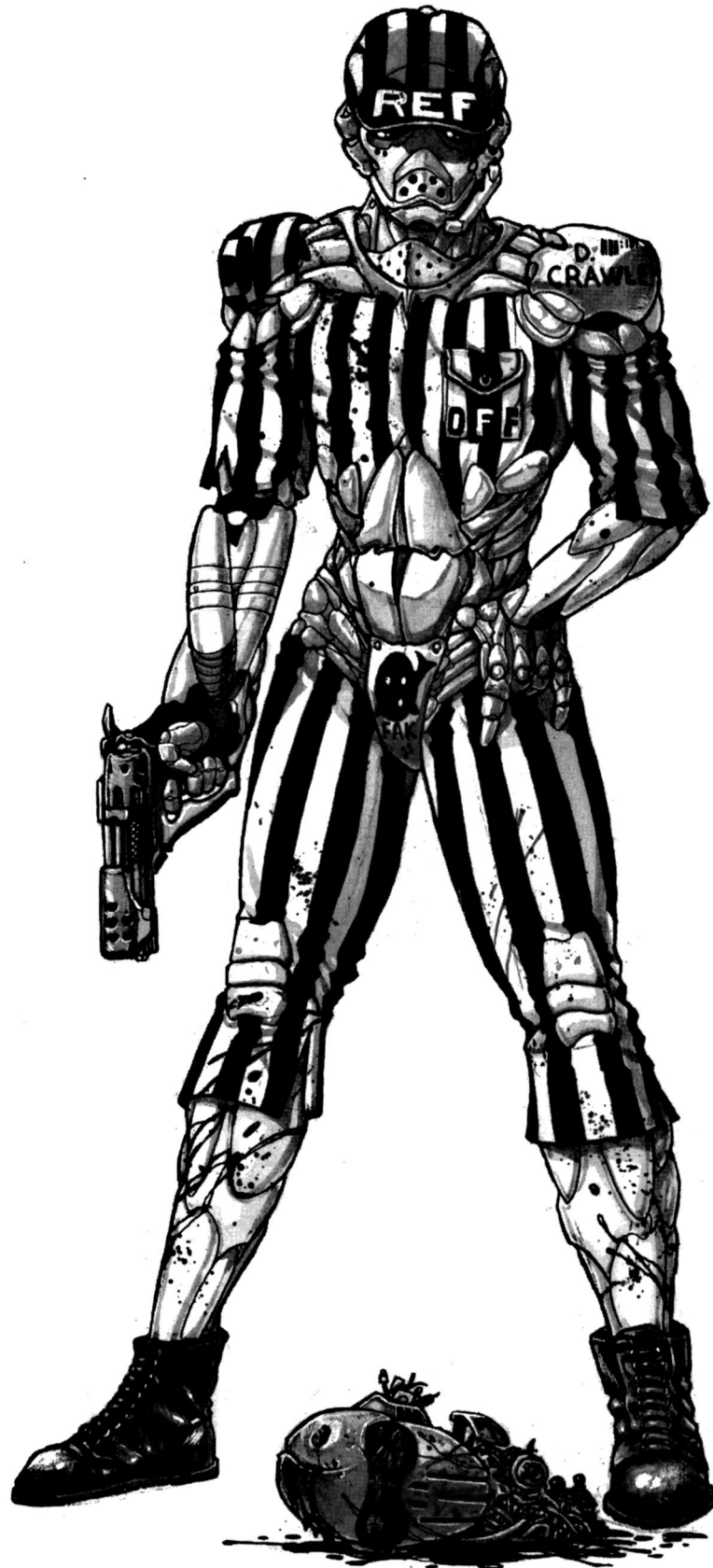
Name: D'nth S'rth**Crime:** Mass murder, sedition and anti-SLA activities.**Description:** 2 m tall, all braids were removed; elaborate rune tattoos cover face, arms, and hands (these symbols are considered heretical).**Profile:** Renegade Shaktar priest (8th Moon). Highly skilled in both melee and fire combat; persuasive speaker.**Connections:** Cult of G'tah, Scavs.**Location of Target:**

Notes: D'nth S'rth is a renegade Shaktar priest (8th Moon) who fled Kn'nth after a failed coup attempt against the Shaktar high lord. He managed to elude a massive blood hunt and vanished from sight for nearly three years. It is suspected that he arrived on Mort around a year and a half ago and settled in Downtown where he founded the Cult of G'tah amongst the downtrodden. The name translates from Shaktar as "Blood Pain" and is bent upon forcing a judgment day and subsequent rebirth with him as a deity. D'nth S'rth must be terminated with extreme prejudice, using messy techniques. A hefty bonus will be awarded if he can be made to beg, but sources doubt that he can be broken. Footage will be broadcast live to Kn'nth.

The Cult of G'tah has between two and three hundred members, all of which are hostile, well armed, and subject to termination at the Contract Killer's discretion. The cult commune is based in the inactive Ferris reactor/power station on sublevel 43. It is unknown if they have managed to bring the power plant back online, but the site is known to have electrical power.

Bounty: 1500c

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JON/DAVE '95.

AGE		EXPERIENCE POINTS	SAVINGS
HEIGHT			
WEIGHT			
EYE COLOUR			
HAIR COLOUR			
COMPLEXION			

[illegible][illegible]

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