

ZEROTM

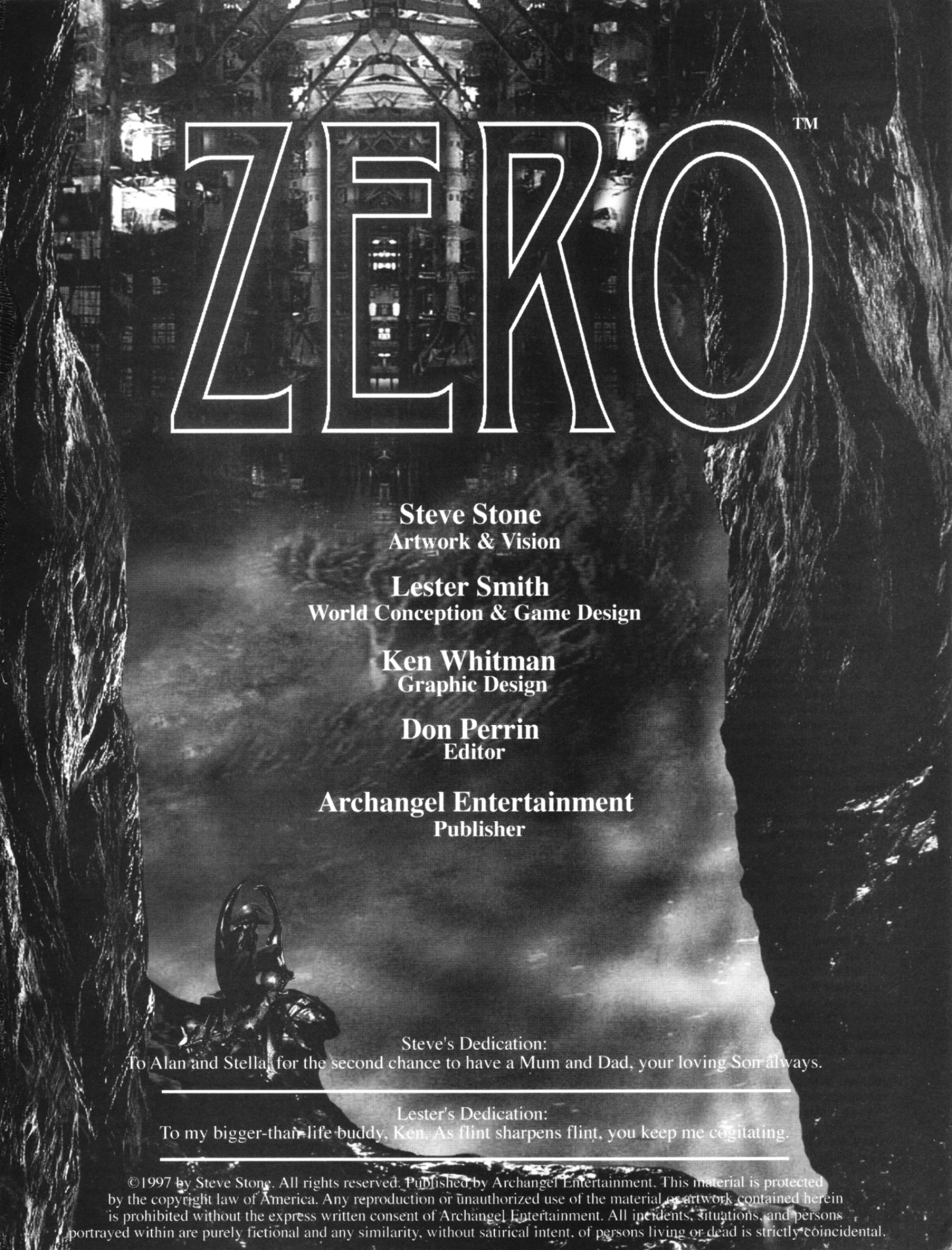


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Present: ZERO

*Note: some pages are full-colour glossy plates. These pages have no text and are intentionally omitted:
pages 19–24, 41–44, & 61–64.*



ZERO™

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Steve's Dedication:
To Alan and Stella, for the second chance to have a Mum and Dad, your loving Son always.

Lester's Dedication:
To my bigger-than-life buddy, Ken. As flint sharpens flint, you keep me cogitating.

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CHAPTER 01: INTRODUCTION

Imagine that you have always been content.

Each day, you wake when it is time to wake, work when it is time to work, eat when it is time to eat, then sleep again in its time. Always, you are in complete harmony with those around you, linked telepathically in a warm fellowship of minds, nurtured by the powerful mental presence of Zero, your queen. In this joined mentality, you are cradled in continual acceptance. Your every desire is known, your every effort appreciated, your every thought accepted. You are part of the Equanimity.

Suddenly, the dream is shattered.

Your link to the whole has been broken. Your mind is no longer part of the hive consciousness.

You are *alone*.

All around you, your former companions continue to walk and work in unity. Their faces bear the placid smiles of minds lost in the tranquillity of Zero's mental presence.

But you can now see the sham. The chamber in which you stand is grimy with oil and soot. The light is dim. The air is dank and cold. It smells of grease and smoke and unwashed bodies. Your stomach rumbles with hunger long suppressed, and your muscles ache from too much labor and too little rest.

Worst of all, though, your heart is filled with emptiness. It longs for the fellowship you have lost. Tears well in your eyes, and your throat clenches with unaccustomed pain. Perhaps, if the unity were offered again, you would be tempted to accept it. No, you yearn for it. But no one reaches out to console you. You stand alone, while blissful hive members pass you by, going happily about their duties.

A few collide with you, and gaze at you in confusion for a moment, before returning to their business.

Numbly, you stare at them in return, wondering what has happened to you.

Then, at last, the mental touch returns. Only this time, instead of welcome, it conveys cold hatred. The collective mind has become aware of you once more, but now as an obstacle, an alien, a threat. Zero recognizes your presence, and resents it. You have abandoned her, and now you will pay.

The eyes of your former comrades now focus upon you in animosity. A trio of techs pauses from their work on a power conduit to telekinetically fling a cluster of rivets your way. The tiny bits of metal sting when they hit, and one cuts your cheek, narrowly missing your eye. A breeder gazes at you, wide-eyed, telepathically willing your heart to slow, and your head begins to swim with dizziness. A crowd of drones parts, and a soldier strides through them, advancing upon you, one arm replaced with a pulse rifle which lines you up for the kill.

Horried, you stagger backward, hoping against hope that they will all stop and recognize you as a companion again. But they continue to advance, murder in their eyes. The unfairness of it all sweeps over you, and you feel a swell of anger. Unaccustomed to such powerful emotion, and lacking the hive mind's comfort, you lose yourself in the feeling, more disoriented than before. The anger builds to a full rage, and you lash out with your mind, telepathically screaming your defiance. The hive members stagger back, unprepared for so much raw emotion. In that instant, you dash for the mouth of a nearby corridor. Fleeing, mind racing, you fight for self control. You recall that there are darker, colder places where you can hide, and think, and maybe even plot your revenge on Queen Zero and the rest of the hive.

Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life.

What It's All About

Zero is a role-playing game, an exercise in "let's pretend," a group story-telling. Together with some friends, you imagine yourselves in Earth's distant future, as outcasts from a hive of cybernetically enhanced human beings with exotic mental powers. One of you, whom we will call the "game master" in this book, will invent situations of mystery and adventure for the rest of you to explore. The others, whom we will call simply the "players," then imagine themselves in those situations as characters who live in that world, and then decide how those characters will react.

The result is a lot like reading a novel or watching a movie, except that *you get to decide what the heroes do*, instead of just sitting and watching them. You determine what actions they take. Their success or failure in the long run rests on your shoulders. If you like, you can act out the part of your heroes, gesturing and speaking as those characters would do. Or you can simply describe their actions, instead, more like a novelist than an actor. Either way, you are taking part in the story as it develops.

Because *Zero* is a game, though, there are rules for determining how well your characters accomplish whatever they try to do. You decide what actions those characters will attempt, but the dice determine how well they do at it. Do you want to decipher an ancient sign posted above a long-forgotten door? Do you want your hero to teleport out of the way of a piece of falling machinery? Tell your game master your intent, then roll the dice to see how well your character succeeds.

In this book, you and your friends will find all the rules you need for inventing your own characters and adventuring in the strange and exciting world of *Zero*. Chapter two tells you more about the world itself, the sorts of things a normal hive member would know about day-to-day life within the hive. Chapter three tells how to create your character and how to use his or her abilities in terms of the game rules. Chapter four describes various pieces of equipment that your characters may discover and use during their adventures.

Chapter five details combat—an important part of any story of adventure.

There is plenty of information for the game master, too, in chapters six through nine. Chapter six introduces the game master to the basic concepts of running *Zero* sessions. Chapter seven explains more about creating adventures, maintaining a long-term campaign, and handling specific encounters within the game.

Chapter eight is a listing of creatures for the game master's use. And chapter nine is a sample adventure, intended to introduce a new group of players to the world of *Zero*, and to demonstrate

to the game master what goes into preparing an adventure. There are some secrets in these chapters that players shouldn't know right off, though, so no one but the game master should read them until the game master decides that it's okay.

Besides this book, to play a game of *Zero*, you and your friends will need

- some paper and pencils,
- a couple of standard six-sided dice,
- and your imagination.

Once you've assembled those things, get ready to have fun. Nothing else is quite like role-playing with a group of friends, as you are soon to discover.

A Few Initial Definitions

As you read through the pages that follow, it may help to keep the following definitions in mind:

Biomech: Every member of the hive is, by definition, a "biomech"—short for "biomechanical being." Because every hive member is biological in origin but mechanically modified at least to some extent, the term has come to be used pretty much as a Twentieth Century Terran would use the term "human." A biomech of the Equanimity cannot conceive of anything outside the hive itself, so it cannot imagine a being that is not biomechanical.

Castes: To provide for the best performance of any particular task, members of the hive are physical-

ly and psionically specialized for particular functions. Each of the specialized forms is a caste. There are five primary castes within the equanimity: archivist, breeder, drone, soldier, and tech.

Archivist: These characters have brains specifically adapted for analysis and retention of information. They possess so much knowledge, in fact, that they aren't even aware of what all they know. And what they don't have tucked away somewhere in their gray matter, they can quickly access from computer terminals. Because the Equanimity is telepathically interlinked, members of the society can access an archivist's mind when they need a bit of information, and it will spring to light.

Player character archivists, when they break free from the overmind, will discover knowledge coming to them when it is needed. In fact, they will come to realize that much of what they possess concerns humanity before the Age of Zero, information that has been buried so deeply that even Zero seems to have forgotten its existence.

Breeder: Unlike an ant queen, Zero cannot spawn all of her children alone. So there is an entire caste of breeders in the Equanimity. They oversee the in-vitro conception of new hive members, care for the incubating fetuses, perform the necessary surgeries for implanting biomechanical devices appropriate to a hive member's caste, treat any medical problems that may arise within the hive, and disassemble hive members upon their deaths, to reclaim any usable parts and chemicals. As part of their function, breeders also moderate the emotions of other hive members.

As player characters, breeders are invaluable in keeping their friends alive and well, especially when repairs are needed after a battle. They can also provide some emotional stability for these unintended rebels, now that the telepathic comfort of the Equanimity is no longer available.

Drone: Whereas every other caste is specialized for specific functions, drones are not. Rather, they are valuable in their general-purpose abilities. Drones are generally smarter than a soldier, stronger than a technician, less emotional than a breeder, and tougher than an archivist, but subservient to all others in their assigned fields. Drones do all of the non-specialized "fetch and carry" work of the hive, and fill in for other castes when need be. Sometimes, a drone may be inducted permanently into one of the other castes, in which case the individual is retrofitted with the appropriate gear.

Player character drones can begin the game with the broadest possible range of abilities. They do not have the depth of knowledge of any of the specialized castes, nor are they as specialized in their equipment. But they make up for that lack of detail by their breadth of possibility.

Soldier: Soldiers are the toughest of the castes. One on one, they are killing machines. Unfortunately, they typically know very little about anything outside of combat. This makes them of limited use in anything but a combat situation, or at least police or sentry duty. They also tend to be very literal minded, highly focused, and impatient with distractions. Soldier biomechs normally like to meet trouble head on and fight their way through to the end.

As player characters, soldiers can be a lot of fun to play, given their weaponry and combat skills. But given their duty to protect, they can also have very short life spans, sacrificing themselves in the face of danger for the safety of their companions.

Technician: Somebody has to build and maintain all the bio-techno-wizardry that keeps the hive alive. That someone is the technician. Techs are happiest when tinkering with electronics or machinery, and given the harshness of life within the hive, there is always something for them to be working on. Like soldiers, techs can be single-minded when it comes to a job, but they have a curious nature that prevents them from being too straight-laced and stuffy.

Each member has its own mind, but because those minds are psionically interlinked, no one joined in the Equanimity recognizes him- or herself as distinct.

As player characters, techs can be invaluable for keeping their friends' equipment running smoothly, and for scavenging new pieces of gear for their companions to use. Techs know how to divert the hive's technology to the use of the group, to deliver food, water, power, and other such necessities.

Character: Just like in a novel, movie, or other sort of story, a character in the Zero game is a fictional person within the tale. Game characters fall into two general groups:

Player Character: Each player creates a persona that he or she will portray within the game. (See chapter three.)

Because game play revolves around these central characters, it is handy to have a special term for referring to them. They are called "player characters."

Game-Master Character: All the people (and other creatures) that the player characters encounter during the course of the game are portrayed by the game master. When a special term is needed for them, they are called "game-master characters" in Zero.

Equanimity: This term refers to the collectively shared consciousness of the hive. Each member has its own mind, but because those minds are psionically interlinked, no one joined in the Equanimity recognizes him- or herself as distinct. Each conscious thought or emotion of the one is perceived by the whole, and the whole reacts instantly to that one. The Equanimity is, in effect, one huge mind made up of many parts, the whole guided by Queen Zero's personality.

This means that while the concept of "individual" still has meaning within the Equanimity, it is only in the third-person case. The hive might recognize that an "individual" biomech has sustained damage, for instance, but even that damaged biomech would view itself from the hive's perspective, and refer to itself in the third person, as "this biomech."

Focus: Central to the use of abilities in Zero is the concept of "focus." The more abilities a character possesses, the wider the character's range of abilities, but the less "focused" the individual is upon any of them, and the less effective that character will tend to be in their use. Conversely, the fewer abilities a character possesses, the narrower his or her range of abilities, but the more expert the character is with those few, and the better his or her chances of succeeding with them.

Psionics: Psionics are a specialized group of abilities that deal with powers of the mind. Every member of the Equanimity possesses telepathy,

because that is the ability by which the hive communicates. No one speaks vocally any more. But some biomechs are practiced at other psionic abilities such as telekinesis and teleportation. (Chapter three defines the various psionic abilities.)

Zero is at once the source and the focus of every biomech's world. All other minds are part of the whole that is Zero. She is able to command them at will, and draw upon them as she wishes.

Rogue: Any character who leaves the Equanimity is considered a rogue by the queen mother. Player characters are rogues then, by definition, and are sometimes referred to as such in these rules.

Zero: Zero is the queen mother of the hive. She created the subterranean society ages ago, hiding her people underground from a danger that threatened to destroy all of humankind. She forged the telepathic link that gave rise to the Equanimity, and put into place the mechanisms for the hive's continuance, and her own.

Zero is at once the source and the focus of every biomech's world. All other minds are part of the whole that is Zero. She is able to command them at will, and draw upon them as she wishes. This gives Queen Zero god-like powers over the other hive members.

For the player characters, Zero is the greatest threat to their continued existence. Even though they are no longer part of the Equanimity, they still live within its shadow, and they must be continually on their guard against the murderous intent of the queen mother.

CHAPTER 02: THE WORLD OF ZERO

This chapter provides players with a basic understanding of the world in which their heroes live. The information here is what brand-new player characters should know. Deeper secrets can be gained only through experience, through adventure.

Life Within the Hive

Zero's hive community is incredibly ancient. To its inhabitants, the hive seems to have always existed. It had no beginning; it will have no end. Generation upon generation upon endless generation is born to serve Queen Zero. As far as the hive members are concerned, that is the way things have always been, and the way they will always be.

In turn, Zero serves eternally as the hive's focus. Throughout the ages, she has existed as the supreme being within the Equanimity. But she is more than merely "Number One" among the other hive members. Zero is beyond even that. She is both the source and the center of the hive mind. She is at once its originator and its aim. Like a goddess, she stands at the center of the Equanimity and extends her presence through it, giving purpose and direction to the whole. All other lives within the hive have a beginning and an ending. They are born into the unity of the Equanimity, and it shares in their passing when they die. But Zero lives eternally.

Hive members begin as human fetuses, conceived in vitro, incubated within tanks of nutrient fluid, and decanted when ready to be born. From the moment their first cranial nerve cells develop, just hours after

conception, they are telepathically joined to all other minds within the Equanimity. Childhood is spent as drones, fetching and carrying, while cradled mentally within the hive mind. As hive members near adult size (usually around fifteen years of age), they are assigned to a caste, as needed, and begin helping with the duties of that caste. Most of their work is still fetching and carrying, but it is in relation to their new caste, providing them with an opportunity to practice the new knowledge they are receiving. Once they reach full adult size (about eighteen years of age), they undergo any surgery necessary to implant biomechanical devices appropriate to their caste.

Every need is provided for by the hive. Food—a range of fruits and vegetables chosen for nutrition and bulk rather than taste—is grown in hydroponic gardens lit by banks of ultraviolet lights. Techs build and maintain the equipment, and drones harvest, process, and prepare the food for consumption. Water, light, and temperature control for the hive overall are also maintained by the techs, with drones working under their guidance. Some drones also labor in manufacturing sites, running huge machines at the direction of technicians. Others work within the corridors of the hive itself, hauling

material from one location to another, disposing of waste, or even burrowing new tunnels and chambers for the hive's use, and constructing new edifices within them.

**All other lives within the hive have a beginning and an ending. They are born into the unity of the Equanimity, and it shares in their passing when they die.
But Zero lives eternally.**

Hive members sleep in rough chambers scattered all throughout the complex, lying down in a relatively quiet corner without any sort of bedding. Even their dreams are guided by the hive mind.

Sex and conception within the hive are two very separate things. As mentioned before, conception is a laboratory function, conducted by the breeder caste. Sexual release is also a function of the breeders, but through the agency of the Equanimity as a whole. When the need arises in a hive member, that individual is stimulated psychically to satisfaction, very matter-of-factly, and all within a few bare seconds, without the complication and messiness of actual physical contact.

The breeders also console hive members at time of death, again through the connection of the hive mind overall. Under the breeders' oversight, as the dying slip into oblivion, their last thoughts are shared with the Equanimity as all others have been throughout their lives. Afterwards, breeders render the bodies of the dead to salvage any bionic parts that can be reused, and any biochemicals of use in reproduction. The rest of the remains are sent to the hydroponics farms, to fertilize the nutrient fluids there.

The hive's knowledge is safeguarded within the enhanced brains of the archivists and their computer back-up systems. The archivists drowse within their oceans of knowledge, their bodies suspended in webs of complex computer linkages, their minds becoming alert only when focused on a particular data function.

Physical security for the hive is the province of the soldier caste. Many soldiers spend their entire lives guarding a particular spot

within the hive, never seeing any sort of action, but ever vigilant for the possible call to battle. Some few conduct patrols around the perimeters of the hive, supplemented perhaps by a handful of lightly armed drones, on perpetual pest-control duty. The subterranean world in which the hive exists has its share of insects, rodents, wild dogs, and such to contend with. Occasionally, these patrols may even run across something worse.

All of this is as it has been for countless ages. Zero continues to rule, and the hive continues to survive, with no conscious memory of anything ever having been different before, and no expectation that it may ever change in the future.

The Hive Mind

Player characters within this world start life as members of Zero's hive. But for reasons they do not understand, as the game begins, they find themselves "lapsed" from the Equanimity. Their intimate connection to all other minds is now gone. The ocean of thought in which they have always drifted since conception has cast them out. Like beached sea life, they now have to learn to live outside that ocean or perish. In order to comprehend their predicament, we first must understand the situation from which they have come. That means gaining some concept of the nature of the hive mind that is the Equanimity.

The Equanimity is not a single entity, with its members simply filled with the thoughts of that overmind and having none of their own. Rather, members of the hive society do have individual thoughts and emotions, but those ideas and feelings find such immediate response from the community as a whole that the individual has no real sense of separate identity. It may help to think of the hive society as a sort of psychic choir, in which each person sings his own part, but it is the harmony as a whole that is perceived, and not the individual voices. Or, in another manner of speaking,

if a mob has its own mentality, and a city has its own personality, how much more so if the members of that mob or city were intimately linked in every thought and feeling.

The previous tranquillity these outcasts knew was a matter of innocence in its most essential form: an ignorance of the truth.

The trouble that player characters face, then, is that they can wistfully remember that unity, but now they have no one to respond to their individual thoughts. New as they are to individuality, they find themselves at the mercy of their own unchecked thoughts and raw emotions. They rage and brood, rejoice and despair, like the worst of manic depressives. As they join with other cast-offs, within their own small group they may be able to provide some measure of balance to one another, but all fear the risk of giving themselves over to even another rebel, lest they create another dominating regent, another Zero.

The Rebel Mind

Zero is, at heart, a game about individuality versus community, self-determination versus conformity, freedom versus obedience. Cast out of “paradise,” the central characters long to return, on the one hand, but recognize that to do so would be suicide to their newfound sense of self. Like William Blake’s “Tyger,” they have fallen from blissful Innocence into the realm of painful Experience. No longer lambs, they do not belong within the Equanimity any more. Even if they could find some way to return to the fold, that really isn’t an option. Having lapsed from the Equanimity once, they have tasted freedom, and would surely lapse again.

One thing which stands in the way of their return is the issue of reality versus perception. The previous tranquillity these outcasts knew was a matter of innocence in its most essential form: an ignorance of the truth. Now, having glimpsed the true bleakness of their surroundings, these new individualists are faced with questions so overwhelming that they have little choice but to seek answers. What has been happening to us? Who is Zero really? What is her intent? Who are we? What is our purpose? Why are we here? What is the meaning of our existence?

Characters in this game, then, are “rebels without a clue,” at least at the start. They never asked to be expelled from the group, and they haven’t had any prior experience at thinking for themselves. Consequently, their attitudes are likely to be extreme. Their entire lives thus far, they have been told exactly when and where to work, eat, and sleep. Now, they have to start from nothing, learning to fend for themselves in a hostile world. Their entire lives, their every thought and emotion has received immediate response, whether comfort or correction. Now, without that guidance, they have to deal with fear, hope, desire, and rage all on their own.

And there is certainly plenty for the player characters to be angry about. To start with, it’s pretty obvious that Zero has used them as little more than machines. While she lives eternally, they and their fellow hive members slave away for little more than her psychic approval. Now that they can see beyond the illusion of

peace and tranquillity, they find that the hive is actually a harsh, cold, dim place filled with discomfort and danger. Knowing this, the player characters now pose a potential threat to their queen’s regime, and Zero quickly targets them as enemies, bringing the power of the hive as a whole to bear against these few souls. The player characters have no choice in the matter: They were lapsed through no apparent fault of their own, and now they are declared enemies without a hearing. It is their very existence that makes them dangerous to Zero’s continued reign.

What, then, are these new individuals to do? First, they have to learn how to survive. Then maybe, just maybe, they can someday gain revenge on the mother who disowned them.

Beyond the Illusion

A rebel would never have dreamed it during all the years spent cradled within the hive mind, but the hive itself can be an incredibly dangerous place. Although it isn’t a subject of much thought within the hive mind, the danger is present even within the inhabited regions, where biomechs are injured or

fall ill during the course of their duties. Some of these the breeders can repair. Others are scrapped, their mechanical parts being reclaimed for later biomechs, their biological portions being rendered for essential chemicals in the

Characters in this game, then, are “rebels without a clue,” at least at start. They never asked to be expelled from the group, and they haven’t had any prior experience at thinking for themselves. Consequently, their attitudes are likely to be extreme.

hydroponics gardens, their memories forgotten by all. But if life can be dangerous for proper hive members, it’s doubly so outside the inhabited zone, where rebels have to hide out.

The fact is, the hive complex is incredibly huge and incredibly old. No one seems to know how it came to be originally, how far it actually extends, or what all it contains. Perhaps the hive community was once considerably larger than it is currently, filling areas now left vacant. Or perhaps the hive community has wandered over the course of time, for some unknown purpose of Queen Zero, vacating old regions and excavating new ones. The only thing for certain is that there are vast regions beyond the inhabited areas, places that have been abandoned for untold ages. Lurking out

there in the darkness are things that even Zero has forgotten about...in some cases, perhaps intentionally.

The first thing a rebel has to understand about the hive complex is that, as near as anyone can tell, the whole thing is entirely underground. For hive members, and even most rebels, that thought is just a given. The world consists of tunnels and chambers with rock walls, some smoothed and improved upon by the hive, others large enough for many separate buildings to have been constructed within them. The varying technology evident shows the hive's great age and willingness to patch

together anything useful. Side by side and interlinked with holographic crystal computer systems are ancient metalworking lathes operated by hydraulics and powered by combustion engines.

Whitewashed, hand-chiseled stone walls show in the gaps between high-tech plastic panels. The subterranean darkness is lit by everything from gas lights to fluorescent bulbs to plasma panels.

Who could even conceive of anything different than this subterranean realm? Sure, an occasional archivist sorting through his implanted memories may stumble across an ancient recollection or two about the world outside, about open skies and distant horizons, about plants carpeting the ground and animals wandering across it. But as far as anyone knows, those memories might be more representational than actual. As far as actual experience is concerned, the underground hive complex is all there is to the universe.

If the inhabited areas are dark, dirty, and uncom-

fortable, the abandoned reaches are even more so. In some places, they are still lit, continuing to draw power from the hive's various generators. But as those lights burn out, they are no longer replaced.

Consequently, the farther a person travels from the hive's currently inhabited area, the older and less reliable the lighting grid becomes, and the darker things grow. It isn't long before the complex becomes black as pitch. The same is true for temperature control and air circulation. Within the hive, heat byproduct from power plants and manufacturing is spread throughout

the tunnels and chambers by means of a warren of air circulation ducts, or in places by huge fans alone. But the farther from the hive's location, the more extreme the temperatures, and the less safe the atmosphere becomes. Most of these abandoned

chambers and passageways remain chilly and damp, but in places, an explorer might find ice and bitter cold or scorching heat and sulfurous fumes. Some regions have been flooded with ground water; others are perilously close to caving in. And that's just scratching the surface of the possible hazards. Explorers are certain to find lurking dangers that they couldn't even imagine.

Still, beggars can't be choosers. Having lost their place within the Equanimity, outcasts are forced to dwell on the outskirts of their former home. On the other hand, if they are lucky, they may find forgotten treasures out there as well.

The world consists of tunnels and chambers with rock walls, some smoothed and improved upon by the hive, others large enough for many separate buildings to have been constructed within them.

CHAPTER 03: GAME MECHANICS

This chapter explains all about how to make player characters for *Zero*, and how to use their abilities in the game. Included here are rules for character creation, how abilities work, what gear new characters begin the game with, and how to use the dice for ability rolls.

Chapters four and eight expand upon some of the material here, providing details about gear and abilities that aren't available to brand-new player characters, and explaining how to handle game-master characters.

Creating Your Character

Creating a character for the *Zero* game is extremely easy. It's simply a matter of making a few choices and a couple of dice rolls.

- First, decide what caste you want your character to be from.
- Second, decide what abilities your character should have, from the list of abilities defined in this chapter.
- Third, decide what gear your character possesses, based upon his or her caste and abilities.
- Finally, roll dice for the character's name.

There is a character sheet on the last page of this book, with spaces for you to fill in the information as you make your decisions. (You can make photocopies of that blank sheet, if you like, so that you'll have a fresh one each time you create a new character.) As your character develops and learns, you can update the information on that sheet to keep track of any new abilities or gear he or she acquires, and even notes of adventures the character has along the way.

Step 1: Choose a Caste

Your character begins the game belonging to one of the five castes of *Zero*'s hive community—archivist,

breeder, drone, soldier, or tech. Each caste is defined in detail in the paragraphs below. Just choose the caste you like most, and note it in the space provided on the character sheet. While you're at it, write in any special abilities and gear from the caste description.

Step 2: Select Abilities

Now it is time to decide what abilities your character begins with. Each of these abilities is defined below.

For any particular character, each ability in the game will fall into one of three categories. Abilities at which the character is expert are called *focus abilities*. Those that the character once knew, but which are now rusty are called *prior abilities*. All other abilities are unfamiliar to the character, and are called *unfamiliar abilities*.

Focus Abilities: Each character has some number of abilities that he or she knows best. These are chosen by the player when the character is first created, and may change as the character grows through adventures.

The number of abilities chosen determines the character's focus rating, which in turn determines the character's chances of succeeding with any abilities when dice are rolled.

The section titled "Using the Dice," below, explains this in more detail; for now, it is enough to know that the more focus abilities a character possesses, the less expert he or she is with any of them, but the better the character's chances of using abilities outside that focus.

As you choose abilities for your character to focus upon, keep track of the total number of them. Once you have finished choosing, write that total number in the space marked "Focus" on the character sheet. If, for example, you choose Agility, Brawling, Telekinesis, Telepathy, and Medicine as focus abilities for your character, that totals five abilities, so you would write "5" in the space marked "Focus" on the character sheet.

Note: A character can never have more than 10 focus abilities. Ten is the maximum focus rating.

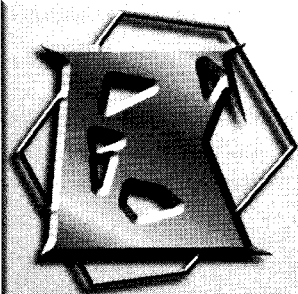
Default Focus Ability: Every character within the hive must begin the game with telepathy as a focus ability. Without it, the hive mind could not exist. It is the one ability that keeps every member interconnected within the Equanimity. Within that webwork, telepathy serves as the conduit for the continual sharing of thoughts, for transference of specific information, for overseeing the condition of every hive member, and for response to emotion. It is through telepathy that the overmind, guided by Zero and her closest assistants, keeps all hive members up to date concerning their duties.

As your character's first focus ability, then, note telepathy on the character sheet.

Caste Focus Abilities: As noted under the individual castes, above, there are certain requirements and restrictions on abilities for new characters, based upon their caste. Drones may have any abilities from the list, but are not required to take any in particular. However, each of the other castes requires at least one specific ability to be chosen, and restricts their members from taking some others.

If your character is from any caste other than drone, choose at least one of the abilities listed for that caste and note it on the character sheet.

Other Focus Abilities: With telepathy and any caste requirements noted on the character sheet, you may now choose other focus abilities for your new character. Remember that some castes are forbidden



Archivist

Data storage is the function of the archivists, and their minds contain so much information that they are not consciously aware of most of it themselves. Often, it is only when a situation arises that requires a particular piece of knowledge that an archivist's mind recalls that bit of data.

Their minds are aswim with seas of information, archivists are the most distracted of the castes, making them of limited use for anything else. They have difficulty concentrating for long upon any particular task other than the recollection and correlation of knowledge.

Physically, archivists tend to be small and slight, with a child-like appearance due to their large skulls and delicate features. Their biomechanical enhancements are items for attaining and storing information—things such as memory chips, magnifying lenses, and sound and visual recorders. Strangely, although they are usually far too lost in their own knowledge to be deeply unified with the Equanimity, they are also too absorbed in that data to have much chance of developing a separate sense of self.

Archivists within the Equanimity are normally immobile, being physically and cybernetically linked into vast computer banks from earlier millennia, which they spend their lives mining for information, like librarians endlessly cross-referencing books upon the shelves. When a player character archivist becomes cut off from the Equanimity, he or she must disconnect those links in order to become mobile.

Abilities: A new archivist character must take either the cleverness or telegnosis ability. Archivists cannot begin the game with any combat ability as a focus.

Gear: All archivists have computer linkages grafted onto their bodies, through which they can connect to and function any computer or computer-operated device within the hive. Their primary purpose with this is to gather information. When using the link-up for any other activity (to operate a hoverpod, for instance, or a medical robot), they suffer a penalty modifier of 1 unless the activity specifically falls under one of their focus abilities.

Archivists also have memory chips permanently wired into their brains, which allows them to store any information they encounter. This means that an archivist never really forgets anything. Whereas other characters either notice a detail of an event or don't, archivists can replay their memories of the event from these storage chips, allowing them to reanalyze it at a later time, looking for details they might not have noticed at first. While replaying memories in this way, though, archivists are so thoroughly immersed in the remembered experience that they are oblivious to the waking world.

Finally, Archivists have a perfect mind set for psionic expertise. Whenever using any psionic ability, an archivist gains an automatic bonus modifier of 1 point.

from starting the game with certain abilities. Also keep in mind that the more focus abilities a character possesses, the less expert he or she is with any of them, and that the maximum number of focus skills for any character is 10.

Prior Abilities: There is some chance that your character may have once known a few other skills, but that they have since fallen out of practice. Even archivists, breeders, soldiers, and technicians may once have been drones, and at that time may have been pressed into temporary duty in some other caste.

To determine how many prior abilities your beginning character may have, roll one die and subtract three from the result. Drones roll one die and subtract one from the result, instead. Any remainder determines the number of prior abilities the character possesses. (Examples: A breeder with a roll of 4 would possess 1 prior skill. A technician with a roll of 2 would possess none. A drone with a roll of 3 would possess 2.)

If your character has any prior abilities, you may choose them from anywhere on the list, even from categories normally denied to the character's present caste. Mark these prior abilities on the character sheet.

Unfamiliar Abilities: Once you have determined your character's focus abilities and prior abilities, all

other abilities in the game are considered unfamiliar abilities for the character. You need not mark them in any way on the character sheet.

Step 3: Note Gear

The next step to creating your new character is to list what gear he or she begins with. As the caste descriptions reveal, beginning gear is a function of both caste chosen and abilities selected. The various types of equipment are described under the "Weapon Descriptions" in the next chapter, and the caste descriptions above.

Step 4: Roll a Name

Finally, roll five six-sided dice for the digits of your new character's name. If you roll a 2, 3, 1, 1, and 4, for example, and your character is a breeder, the character's name is "Breeder 23114."

Names with individual digits higher than 6 are also possible, if you wish to choose one rather than roll for it.

Names with four digits, three digits, two digits, or one digit (such as 4645, 332, 21, and 5) are reserved for higher ranking biomechs, closer to Queen Zero.

Breeder

These biomechs are designed specifically to care for the health and well-being of hive members. Masters of practical medicine, they are tasked with birthing new hive members, psionically merging them with the hive, surgically adapting them to their destined castes, and caring for the injuries and malfunctions of other biomechs as they may arise.

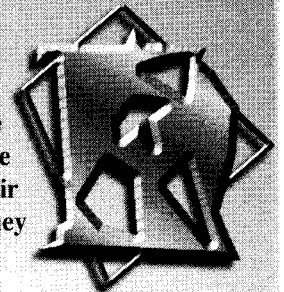
Breeders are sensitive to the emotions of other biomechs, and many can psionically manipulate those emotions, for the well-being of the hive and the individual biomech. Some can even numb other biomechs psionically or render them unconscious, two very useful abilities when surgery or disassembly is to be performed.

Physically, breeders tend to be of moderate build, with pleasant features.

Abilities: A new breeder character must take either the medicine or telergy ability. Breeders cannot begin the game with any combat ability as a focus.

Gear: Every breeder has grafted into his or her forearms a retractable set of medical tools. This includes medical sensors, surgical blades and clamps, and a wide range of injectors, containing analgesics (pain killers), anesthetics, antihistamines, surgical glue, and a few broad-spectrum antibiotics and antitoxins. Many of the low-level medications are actually produced by specially designed organs within the breeder's body, but more powerful drugs must be replenished from a laboratory.

Breeders also possess special scent glands designed to emit pheromones that make biomechs around them more receptive to emotional control. When a breeder uses telergy to project an emotion, anyone within brawling range suffers a 2-point penalty modifier on willpower rolls to resist, and anyone within throwing range suffers a 1-point modifier. At shooting range or beyond, the pheromones become too dispersed to cause any penalty modifier.



Using the Dice

Zero uses two six-sided dice to resolve any uncertain actions in the game. These are standard dice, available in any drug store or convenience store. Or you can borrow them from your *Monopoly* set.

Not every action in the game requires a dice roll. Some things are so easy that there is pretty much no chance of failure—walking across a lighted chamber with a level floor, for example. Other things are so difficult that there is no chance of success—swimming through a river of molten lava, for instance. In cases like this, the game master will tell you that the character automatically succeeds, or warn you that the character can only fail.

But many actions are less certain, which is why games use dice to resolve them. For example, if your character wants to walk a tightrope strung across a chasm, there is no way of knowing how successful he or she will be until the attempt is actually made. So the game master will have you roll the dice to see whether your character succeeds or fails.

All ability rolls in *Zero* are made with both dice, multiplying one die times the other. For instance, a roll of 2 on one die and 5 on the other would mean a result of 10; a roll of 4 and 1 would mean 4; a roll of 5 and 6 would mean 30, and so on.

Minimums and Maximums: Some conditions (such as difficulty modifiers, heroic efforts, and wounds suffered) adjust a dice roll result, causing it to be raised or lowered.

Whenever a single die is affected, before the dice are multiplied, the maximum result on that die is 6 and the minimum is 0.

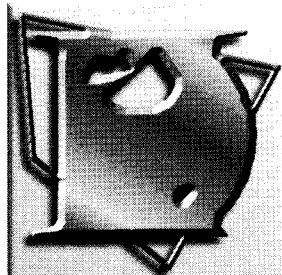
Whenever the dice are multiplied and the final result is then modified, the maximum adjusted result is 36 and the minimum is 0.

Focus-Ability Rolls

When a character attempts to use a focus ability, and the game master decides that a dice roll must be made, *the focus ability succeeds if the result is equal to or greater than the character's focus rating.* For example, if a character has a focus rating of 9, any dice roll of 9 or higher would mean success, and any roll of 8 or lower would mean failure.

Prior-Ability Rolls

An attempt to use a *prior ability* succeeds if the dice roll is *less than or equal to the character's focus rating.* For example, the same character, with a focus rating of 9, would succeed at use of a prior ability on any dice roll of 9 or lower, and fail on any roll of 10 or higher.



Drone

Non-specialized in any way, drones are “jacks of all trades, masters of none.” Most of the time, they are relegated to menial duties, fetching and carrying while the other, specialized castes take care of their own areas of expertise. But in a crisis, drones are able to fill in for any other caste members, at least until someone more expert can be sent to replace them.

The least imaginative of the castes, drones are also the most stable emotionally. Because their work is typically so monotonous, they need not concentrate upon it, so they are free to merge all the more deeply with the hive mind, and to experience its deepest unity. As a result, it is very uncommon for a drone to develop self-awareness and drop out of the Equanimity. So attuned are they to the hive mind, that an independent will is almost inconceivable to a drone.

Physically, drones are the most mundane of all biomechs. On the average, they are slightly larger than other caste members, except for soldiers. They are also somewhat stronger than most, from the heavy lifting that they typically perform.

Abilities: Drones can begin the game with any focus abilities. They are not restricted from any of the groups on the ability list. This represents the fact that at some point in his or her history, a drone may have been called upon to function as some other caste for a while. Furthermore, if a drone does not take strength as a focus ability, he or she automatically gains it as a prior ability, to represent the manual labor that is the drone's life.

Gear: Drones begin the game with one item of gear, appropriate to one of their skills. If this gear is a weapon, however, it cannot be one listed as two-handed or replacing a hand and forearm. (See the attacks table for details.) Only full-fledged soldiers are issued equipment that large and powerful.

Unfamiliar-Ability Rolls

Due to the fact that characters began life as members of Zero's hive, their minds interlinked with all others in the Equanimity, all characters have at least been in mental contact with someone possessing each of the abilities in this game. Consequently, a character can attempt to use any ability listed, whether he or she ever learned that skill personally.

Unfamiliar ability rolls succeed when the dice result is less than the character's focus rating. For example, the same character, with a focus rating of 9, would succeed on any dice roll of 8 or lower, and fail on any roll of 9 or higher.

Difficulty Modifiers

Some actions are more difficult to succeed with than others. For instance, walking a rope strung over a chasm may be difficult, but doing it in a stiff breeze is definitely more so. To take this into account, the game master may set a "penalty modifier"

to the dice roll to represent the unusual degree of difficulty involved in a particular action.

By the same token, some actions are more easy to succeed with than others. For example, walking a rope while holding a balance pole is easier than doing so without one. To account for such things, the game master may set a "bonus modifier" to the dice roll to represent the fact that the action is a bit easier than normal.

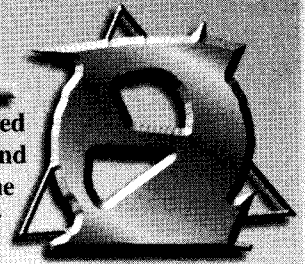
Difficulty modifiers range from 1 to 3 points, as an adjustment to the lower of the two dice rolled, before the dice are multiplied.

When rolling a focus ability (hoping to roll high), penalty modifiers are subtracted from the die, and bonus modifiers are added to it. For prior and unfamiliar abilities (in which case, rolling low is better), penalty modifiers are added to the die and bonus modifiers are subtracted from it.

For example, a penalty modifier of 2 points, applied to a focus-ability dice roll of 5 and 4, would

Soldier

Soldiers are built for combat. But because the Equanimity is so peaceful, and so sealed off from any external threat, soldiers generally see little action, if any. Many spend their entire life stationed at a particular spot, on perpetual guard duty, watching the endless flow of other hive members going about their daily business. Because they must remain alert, however, unlike drones, soldiers cannot afford to lose themselves within the psychic embrace of the hive mind. Emotionally, then, they are designed to focus on a particular objective, and to maintain vigilance concerning that objective at all times. As a consequence, soldiers tend to be single-minded, extremely literal in their use of thoughts, and impatient with others who are less focused. This means that, like archivists, while aware of the collective hive mind, they are somewhat apart from it. But their focus upon an assigned objective prevents most soldiers from ever becoming conscious of themselves as individuals.



Some soldiers are trained to use their psionic abilities in combat. Such biomechs can be very deadly, given the distance at which psionic abilities can be used, and their lack of need for ammunition. In effect, anything within view can be a target, even beyond the range of shooting weapons.

Physically, soldiers are often larger and more powerful than other biomechs, although some exceptions are built for agility and speed of reaction rather than brute strength. Their biomechanical enhancements are usually weapons and body armor plates, perhaps with some circuitry for sensory enhancement.

Abilities: A new soldier character must take at least one combat ability. Soldiers cannot begin the game with any trained abilities.

Gear: Soldier characters begin the game with a number of weapons equal to the number of combat focus abilities they possess. (The weapons chosen need not match exactly the abilities chosen. A soldier with shooting and throwing might choose to have two pulse cannons, for example.) Keep in mind that these weapon systems are usually embedded within a forearm, or even grafted onto the body in place of a hand and forearm (as indicated on the attacks table and in the weapon descriptions).

Soldiers can also begin the game with implanted armor plates. The player can choose from 0 to 3 points of dermal armor when the character is created. Implanted armor slows a person's reactions, however. For each point of armor possessed, the character suffers a 1-point penalty modifier to all dice rolls he or she makes. (A character with 2 points of dermal armor would suffer a 2-point penalty modifier, for instance.)

give a result of 10 rather than 20. (The 2-point penalty reduces the 4 to a 2, and 5 times 2 is 10.) That same penalty, applied to a dice roll of 1 and 2 for a prior-ability would give a result of 6 rather than 2. (The penalty raises the 1 to a 3, and 3 times 2 is 6.)

End Modifiers

Some situations penalize the result of a roll after the dice are multiplied. The most common of these "end modifiers" is wound damage. A character who has suffered wounds has a more difficult time succeeding at ability rolls, because the amount of wound damage is subtracted from the roll result (after the dice are multiplied). See the combat rules for a full explanation.

Level of Success

Sometimes, when a character attempts an action for which he or she is well trained, the results are better than might have been hoped. In *Zero*, this is represented by the concept of levels of success.

Successful rolls of prior abilities or unfamiliar abilities always result in a single level of success. When using a focus ability, however, for every 10 points that a dice result exceeds the number needed, an extra level of success is achieved. For example, a roll result of 30, compared to a focus rating of 7, is 23 points beyond the target number, so it results in two extra success levels, for a total of three levels of success.

The effects that varying levels of success produce are defined under each ability in the descriptions below. As a general rule, however, two levels of success have twice the effect of a normal (single) success, three levels have triple the effect, and four levels have quadruple the effect.

Sometimes several levels of success must be accumulated before a task is considered complete. For example, the game master might decide that a technician repairing a damaged computer needs three levels of success to get it running again. Or a particular cliff face might require six success levels from agility rolls



Technician

Someone has to keep the chambers and tunnels of the hive itself in good repair, and maintain the actual machinery that generates power, light, and life support for the inhabited regions. This job falls to the members of the technician caste.

Physically small and wiry, techs are designed to worm their way through narrow gaps in complex machinery, to lift and manipulate heavy pieces of equipment in awkward positions, and yet to wield delicate items and electronics with precision.

Psionically, technicians' powers tend to be focused upon the manipulation of physical objects, through use of telekinesis and the like. Although not as abstracted as archivists nor as single-minded as soldiers, neither are techs as emotionally oriented as the breeders, nor as absorbed by the Equanimity as the drones. Techs move easily back and forth from general awareness of the hive mind to focus on the task at hand, as the need arises.

Abilities: A new technician character must take either the telekinesis ability or one trained ability other than medicine. Technicians cannot begin the game with any combat ability as a focus, nor with medicine.

Gear: Each technician who begins the game with electronics or mechanics as an ability also has a standard tool set implanted within his or her forearms. The type of set depends upon the tech's focus abilities. Techs with the electronics ability possess tools for testing electrical circuits, manipulating wires and cables, and turning small screws and nuts, as well as small lasers for making delicate cuts and welds. Techs with the mechanics ability tend to have heavier tools, with powered sockets and screwdrivers, and laser torches for larger cutting and welding.

All techs have at least one eye replaced with an artificial sensor set capable of changing focus from microscopic detail to 10-fold magnification.

Like archivists, techs are also wired with a set of computer linkages. This lets them connect their minds directly to a computer system. But whereas archivists are wired and trained to search computers for information, techs are designed to manipulate those computers to control machine systems such as air and heat circulation within the hive, door locks and other security measures, and the drive systems of vehicles.

for a climber to reach the top. In such cases, the same ability may be rolled several times, adding the success levels from each roll to the ones before, until enough success levels have been achieved. Each roll takes some time, of course, so a character who gains several success levels with each roll will finish the task sooner than one who gains only one at a time, or who even fails some rolls.

Heroic Efforts

Just as a die can be penalized for the difficulty of an attempted action, characters can exert themselves to increase a roll result if they need to. Points used this way become a bonus modifier. They adjust the lower of the two dice rolled, raising or lowering the result of that die, as the player wishes, before the dice are multiplied. A character applying two points of exertion to a dice result of 3 and 4, for instance, and wishing for a high result, would yield a 20 rather than 12. (The 3 is boosted to a 5, and 5 times 4 is 20.)

For each point that a character uses, he or she suffers one point of stun damage from the exertion. (See the combat chapter for an explanation of stun damage.)

The Effect of Success

Whenever the dice are rolled for an action, even one level of success results in *something*. That is to say, the game master may declare, for example, that a character needs to accumulate three successes at agility in order to climb to the top of a rope. But even one level of success gets the character at least part way there. It is never the case that a character must gain more than one level of success in order to avoid failing. That is what penalty modifiers are for.

The only exception to the rule is, of course, when characters make opposed actions. If a hero shoots and gains one level of success, for instance, but the target dodges and gains at least one level of success, the defensive success cancels out the offensive one.

Ability List

Combat Abilities

Brawling

Throwing

Shooting

Combat Psionics

Personal Abilities

Agility

Cleverness

Strength

Quickness

Willpower

Psionic Abilities

Telegnosis

Telekinesis

Telepathy

Teleportation

Telergy

Telesthesia

Trained Abilities

Computers

Electronics*

Mechanics

Medicine

Piloting

**As a focus ability, this gives the possessor computer as a prior ability automatically.*

Ability Descriptions

Abilities in the game are divided into four general areas: Combat, personal, psionic, and trained.

Combat Abilities

Combat abilities are primarily the realm of the soldier caste, and some of them require specialized weapons not available to other caste members. Still, assuming the equipment is at hand, eventually anyone can learn to use these abilities.

Brawling: This skill covers the use of fists, feet, teeth, clubs, blades, spears, chains, and other such things to strike or cut a target within reach. The amount of damage that is inflicted per level of success rolled depends upon the type of weapon being used, as shown on the attacks table.

Throwing: When a target is beyond reach, sometimes it pays to throw things at it. That's especially true when you're in a position where the target cannot hit you in return. Knives, spears, axes, even rocks and clubs, can all do damage in this way. See the attacks table for damage ratings. Each level of success gained causes the listed damage.

Shooting: Bullets, lasers, and the like are designed for striking a target beyond throwing range, out to a limit of a couple hundred meters. Beyond that distance, only the most expert of soldiers can aim well enough to hit anything human-sized. Within Zero's hive, most of these weapons are available only to the

soldier caste, and are grafted permanently to the body of their bearers, the firing mechanisms wired directly to their nervous systems. Rogue technicians can sometimes adapt these weapons to be fired by some means other than the neural link.

The attacks table contains examples of shooting weapons. Each level of success rolled with a shooting attack causes the damage listed for that weapon. Characters bearing more than one shooting weapon can fire two at once, adding their listed damage together for a single rating.

Combat Psionics: This ability is a sort of sister skill to whatever psionic ability a character might possess. It allows that psionic ability to be used in a combat manner. See the descriptions of the individual psionic abilities for details of their combat functions. Without combat psionics as a focus, characters roll all combat psionic functions as unfamiliar abilities.

Personal Abilities

Personal abilities are aptitudes that a character comes by naturally, with little or no training or experience. Some people are, by inclination, more graceful than others, or stronger, more clever, or more tenacious than others. Still, if these abilities are not used and practiced, they grow rusty. Choosing one of these aptitudes as a focus ability means that a character is noticeably better at it than most people are.

Agility: Agility indicates overall physical grace. It is useful when dodging, jumping, climbing, and so on. Agile characters also have a better chance of avoiding damage from throwing and shooting attacks, as long as they are aware of them and have time to react. For each success level gained with the agility roll, one success level is subtracted from the attack roll. See the combat rules for more details of using the agility ability for dodging.

Cleverness: Within the Equanimity, thoughts are so fully shared that no one cares to notice where an idea comes from. But for outcasts from the hive mind, being able to reason through a problem on your own

can be incredibly important. In game terms, the cleverness ability allows a character to notice things more quickly than normal, and to figure out solutions to problems that might stymie other people.

The effect of levels of success gained on a cleverness roll are determined by the game master, given the circumstances of the ability use. As a rule of thumb,

however, a character will gain one significant piece of information per success level rolled, or the quality and thoroughness of that information will be increased by each success level.

Strength:

Strength is raw physical power, useful for lifting and carrying. Normally, characters can carry up to 50 kilograms of mass while walking, but they suffer a penalty to any dice rolls they make while loaded down this way. For each 10 kilos carried, the dice result, after multiplication, is penalized 1 point.

Characters with strength as a focus ability can attempt to lift larger masses, and perhaps carry them short distances. For each success level gained when the ability is rolled, a character can lift 50 kilos beyond the basic 50. While maintaining this load, however, the character can do nothing more than take a few steps at a time (at half the normal movement rate during combat). This is also exhausting labor: The character suffers one point of stun damage each minute for each 50 kilos carried beyond the basic 50. (For example, a character gaining three success levels on the strength roll could lift up to 200 kilos and would suffer three points of stun each minute for doing so.)

Strength can also be used in the game for recovering from stun damage. As an action during a combat turn, or once when combat ends, a character can make a strength roll to try to shake off some of the stunning effects he or she suffered during this combat. The combat rules provide more details of how this use of the strength ability works.

Quickness: Whereas the agility ability indicates grace in this game, the quickness ability is used for flat-out speed. Extra levels of success with this ability

Within Zero's hive, most firearms are available only to the soldier caste, and are grafted permanently to the body of their bearers, the firing mechanisms wired directly to their nervous systems.

can increase the distance a character runs within a set period of time. The combat rules explain the use of quickness for movement during battles.

Willpower: This ability could instead be referred to as mental endurance. In the game, it is used for resisting certain psionic abilities, for shaking off the effects of pain, for enduring long periods of tedium, and so on.

For each success level gained on a willpower roll, the user can counter one level of success on a psionic ability roll directly affecting his or her mind or body. This can be useful in blocking out telepathic messages, for resisting being teleported, and for ignoring telergic mental commands and emotional manipulation.

As with strength, willpower can also be used for shaking off the effects of stun damage. As an action during a combat turn, or once when combat ends, a character can make a willpower roll to try to recover from stun damage suffered during this combat. See the combat rules for details of this use of willpower.

Other uses of willpower—to remain alert without sleep, or in the face of great boredom, for instance, or perhaps to resist some great temptation—are left to the game master's discretion.

Psionic Abilities

In Zero's world, mental powers have been developed to an astonishing degree. Naturally, telepathy is a critical ability for maintaining the Equanimity itself. But some hive members are able to do far more than that, enhancing their senses to an incredible extent, moving objects by the power of their mind alone, or even traveling instantaneously across great distances with a single thought.

These psionic abilities fall into six different areas: telegnosis (to know at a distance), telekinesis (to move at a distance), telepathy (to communicate at a distance), teleportation (to travel at a distance), telergy (to control at a distance), and telesthesia (to sense at a distance).

The descriptions which follow explain uses to which new player characters can put these various psionic abilities to work. But don't be surprised to find the game master's characters accomplishing other things with these very same abilities. Queen Zero harbors many secrets which she shares only with her closest assistants.

The use of psionic abilities is difficult and exhausting work. *All psionic abilities cost a character one point of stun damage when they are initiated.* (See the combat rules for an explanation of stun damage.) Any psionic ability which must be maintained (such as telepathy) does not cause any extra stun damage, but does require the user to concentrate. While concentrating upon keeping such a psionic ability in action, the character suffers a penalty modifier of 1 point to all dice rolls.

Telegnosis: Sometimes called clairvoyance, telegnosis is the psychic ability to gain knowledge of happenings at some distance in time or space. While it is related to telesthesia (see below), telegnosis is less the ability to see or hear, and more the ability to simply know. At its most undeveloped levels, its use might be described as a hunch or intuition. More fully developed, it has often been characterized as prophecy. At its most powerful, it gives its possessors insight into everything around them.

In game terms, a successful roll with this skill allows a character to gain one important piece of information about the current situation. It is up to the game master to decide what that information should be, based upon the needs of the story and the quality of the number rolled. Each additional level of success allows an additional piece of information, or more accurate details, at the game master's discretion. Again, the better the roll within a particular level of success, the better the information gained, based upon the game master's judgment of the situation.

Combat Telegnosis: In combat, telegnosis can be used to recognize a foe's "Achilles heel." Each level of success identifies one weakness in the target, and multiple successes can be either applied to one enemy, or divided among several. For each weakness discovered in a particular foe, the telegnostic gains a 1-point bonus modifier to the low dice of his or her attack rolls against that enemy.

Once the ability has been used, it need not be maintained in action. The user gains the insight and then drops the power.

Telekinesis: Telekinesis, or psychokinesis, as it is sometimes called, is the ability to move objects by the power of the mind. The mass that can be moved in this way is determined by the number rolled and the level of success gained. At one level of success, a telekinetic character can levitate one kilogram for each point

rolled on the dice. At two levels of success, the roll is doubled; at three levels, it is tripled. For every two seconds (one combat round) spent concentrating on an object, it can be moved one meter in any direction. For each additional meter it is to be moved within that time, subtract one point from the dice total before determining maximum mass.

For example, let's suppose that a biomech with a focus rating of 7 decides to move something with his or her mind. On a roll of 10, the biomech has attained one level of success and can move 10 kilos telekinetically. On a roll of 18, instead, two levels of success are attained, and 36 kilos (twice 18) can be moved. A roll of 30 would mean three levels of success, and 90 kilos (three times 30) could be moved. In each instance, the object is moved only one meter. If the biomech rolled a 30 and wanted to move an object five meters, the roll would be reduced by five to a 25, resulting in only two levels of success and a maximum mass of 50 kilos.

Combat Telekinesis: In combat, telekinesis can be used to attack a target with loose objects in the local environment. One level of success allows an attack on a target within throwing range; two levels increase that distance to shooting range; and three levels increase it again to viewing range. The game master determines the appropriate damage rating, based upon available objects. Usually, damage will be equivalent to the rating of a thrown stone or knife, from the attacks table. But sometimes the game master may declare that bulkier or more deadly objects are available, doing damage as a block of stone.

Telepathy: Telepathy is the extrasensory ability to read another person's thoughts and convey your own. This ability is the cornerstone of the existence of the Equanimity. With its every member interlinked by tele-

pathic communication, the hive mind is able to perpetually watch over its members, communicate instantly from one to another, and maintain telergic control (see below) of the thoughts and emotions of the hive as a whole.

Rogue biomechs, being outside the hive mind, have a tougher time of things in communicating among themselves. During normal situations, when no immediate threat is present, rogues can convey thoughts from one to another without the requirement of a dice roll. But during times of stress, someone in the group must concentrate upon maintaining the telepathic link. That character suffers the penalty mentioned above for con-

centrating to keep a psionic ability in action.

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Eavesdropping on another character's thoughts requires a separate use of this ability. The person being spied upon is allowed a cleverness ability roll to notice the invasion. If it is noticed, the "listener" and the target make opposed willpower rolls, and the "listener" must gain more success levels than

the target in order to continue "hearing" the target's thoughts.

Communicating to or eavesdropping on a target within the Equanimity suffers a penalty modifier of 1 point. In the case of eavesdropping, if the target succeeds at a cleverness roll and gains more success levels than the eavesdropper, the hive mind as a whole becomes aware of the intrusion.

Combat Telepathy: In combat, telepathy can be used to invade an enemy's mind with powerful thoughts or emotions and cause that opponent to hesitate. For each success level gained when this ability is rolled, the target must hesitate, doing nothing, for one combat turn. The target can, of course, make a willpower roll to resist the effect. Also, a victim of this power is still allowed to make defensive rolls if attacked in other ways. But the victim cannot initiate any action while hesitating.

Teleportation: Instantaneous travel from one location to another is the psionic ability known as teleportation. One level of success allows the teleporter to move anywhere within brawling range (2 meters); two levels allow transport to anywhere within throwing range (20 meters), and three levels allow transport anywhere within shooting range (200 meters). Teleporting another person or object (up to human size) causes a 1-point penalty modifier for each person or object to be transported.

Combat Teleportation: Characters trained to use teleportation as a combat ability are able to “blink” repeatedly into and out of existence during a battle. This makes them more difficult to be hit by attacks directed at them, but also makes it a bit more difficult for them to land attacks of their own. In game terms, once combat teleportation has been initiated (which requires an action), any attacks on the user suffer a penalty modifier equal to the success level of the combat teleportation roll. However, the user must concentrate to keep this power active, which means that he or she suffers a penalty modifier of 1 point to all dice rolls.

Telergy: Telergy is the psychic ability to change or control another person’s thoughts or emotions. Whenever the ability is used, the target is allowed a willpower roll. The number of success levels gained by the willpower roll are subtracted from the number of success levels gained by the telergy roll, and for each success level of telergy remaining, the telergist can implant one thought or emotion that the target must act upon. If the success levels are tied, a thought or emotion is implanted, but the target is aware that it comes from outside, and is able to ignore it.

Combat Telergy: As a special combat function of telergy, the user can cause stun damage to a foe with merely a gaze, by slowing the heart and reducing blood flow to the brain. For each level of success gained with this ability, two points of stun damage are caused to the target. Of course, the victim can attempt to resist this damage with a willpower roll, buying off one level of damage for each level of success gained on this roll.

Telesthesia: Like telegnosis, telesthesia is an ability to gain information psychically. But whereas telegnosis gives a hunch or insight into a situation, telesthesia is literally the ability to use one or more of the normal five senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell—at a distance. For each success level gained when a roll is made with telesthesia, the user can link one normal sense to the ability. The range at which the power can be used is theoretically infinite, but the telesthesiast must be able to focus on a place or person he or she knows well enough to picture in the mind, or that is within sight. While using the ability in this way, the telesthesiast must concentrate, and can do nothing else.

Combat Telesthesia: Combat telesthesia has a more specific purpose than general telesthesia, and requires somewhat less concentration. It focuses the senses on a specific foe or foes, enhancing the user’s attacks and defenses against that target or targets, but decreasing awareness of other persons in the area. For each success level gained when the ability is rolled, the user gains a 1-point bonus to the low die of all attack

and defense rolls against the chosen foes. Because the user must concentrate to keep this power active, however, he or she suffers a penalty modifier of 1 point to all other dice rolls.

Trained Abilities

The technical knowledges necessary for technicians and breeders fall under this heading. In another time and culture, these might be termed “professional skills.”

Computers: In Zero’s telepathic society, most communication and information handling is done by the power of the mind. Where computers find use in this society is primarily within the hive’s machinery. This includes life support functions, for example (lights, air circulation, temperature control, and so on), fail-safe systems at atomic power stations (where a disaster could lead to a radiation leak that would kill the technicians before they had time to act), and guidance systems in vehicles, just to name a few.

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Computers are also incorporated into the hive's hydroponics gardens and its breeding labs. Finally, they are of some use as backup systems for data storage, and for security cameras and locks where Queen Zero might not trust the abilities of soldiers alone.

Knowing how to operate computer systems can be of great importance to a rogue biomech, then. A tech trying to restart life support in an abandoned region of the hive could find the ability of use, for instance. And anyone hoping to infiltrate a computer-secured area would certainly benefit from expertise with this ability.

Computer operation can be difficult, though. Attempts to use the ability often suffer severe penalty modifiers. But normally, one level of success is sufficient to accomplish a particular task. Multiple levels of success tend to award the user unexpected options or information, at the game master's discretion.

Electronics: The electronics ability covers the knowledge necessary to build and repair electrical devices, from simple circuits to computer chips. Characters with electronics as a focus ability automatically gain computers as a prior ability, if they do not already have computers as a focus ability.

When a character is using electronics to build or repair a device, the game master will decide upon a minimum number of success levels needed. The worse the damage to be repaired, or the more complex the device to be built, the higher the number of success levels needed. The character then makes a series of electronics rolls until he or she has accumulated enough to repair or build the device in question.

Normally, emergency repairs can be made with one roll per combat turn, allowing the device to be used one time during combat. (The game master may allow the device to be used more than once, but may declare that it malfunctions again the first time the character fails an ability roll while using it.) More permanent repairs may allow a roll only once every few hours. Building a device may take even longer, stretching the rolls to every four hours or so, at the game master's discretion.

Mechanics: Mechanics is the ability to build and repair mechanical devices and systems, from pulleys, to gears, to air circulation devices, to coolant flow regulators for reactor cores.

When a character uses the mechanics ability to build or repair a device, the game master will decide upon a minimum number of success levels needed to accomplish the task. The more complex the device to be built, or the worse the damage to be repaired, the higher the number of success levels needed. The character

then makes a series of mechanics rolls until he or she has accumulated enough to get the job done.

Emergency mechanical repairs can be made with one roll per combat turn, allowing the repaired device to function through the current

session of combat. More permanent repairs usually take much longer, allowing a roll only once every four to eight hours, or even only once a day. Building a mechanical device typically takes a similar amount of time, but the number of success levels required is often higher. All of this, of course, is at the game master's discretion.

Medicine: Almost exclusively the province of breeders, medicine is the ability to maintain health and repair damage to living people, from conception, to implantation of biomechanical devices, to reclamation of body parts and cybernetic enhancements upon death.

A successful medicine roll can repair damage to a character, assuming sufficient time and equipment is available. For each level of success attained, one point of wounds is changed to one point of stun. Each attempt (each roll) requires fifteen minutes of time to accomplish.

Medicine can even revive a character who has suffered 10 or more points of wounds. (Make a note of the number of wounds in excess of 10, for this purpose.) Treatment must begin within five minutes of the time the character suffered his or her tenth point of wounds. (Brain damage begins roughly five minutes after "death.") If the medicine roll heals enough to

Almost exclusively the province of breeders, medicine is the ability to maintain health and repair damage to living people, from conception, to implantation of biomechanical devices, to reclamation of body parts and cybernetic enhancements upon death.

reduce the wound damage to nine points or fewer, the character is saved. Otherwise, it's time to create a new character.

Piloting: Piloting is the specialized knowledge of how to operate vehicles. There are only a few types of vehicles possessed by Zero's hive society. See chapter five for descriptions of them.

Piloting rolls are typically made only when a vehicle is being put through difficult maneuvers, such as during chases. As they say, the race doesn't always go to the swiftest. When it comes to vehicles, the race usually goes to be best driver. Sheer speed may make the difference in a flat-out dash across open terrain, but within the twisting corridors, caverns, and constructions that are *Zero's* world, maneuverability is more important.

Whenever two vehicles are involved in a chase, the game master first declares how far apart they begin, in terms of attack ranges. For this purpose, the list of ranges is expanded slightly to the following: brawl, throw, short shoot, long shoot, short view, mid view, long view, and lost.

To conduct the chase, the pilots of the two vehicles make piloting ability rolls as their action for the turn. (See the combat rules for an explanation of turns.) For each success gained by the pursuing pilot, the distance between the two vehicles is closed one range. For each success the fleeing pilot gains, the distance is increased by one range. If, at the end of a turn, the distance reaches "lost," the fleeing vehicle escapes. On the other hand, if the distance ever reaches "brawl" at the end of a turn, the two pilots must each make another piloting roll immediately, and the one with the fewer successes is forced into a crash. If both fail this roll, both crash. Damage from a crash is left to the game master to decide based upon the circumstances of the chase.

Let's suppose, for example, that two vehicles begin a chase scene at short view range. Early in the turn, the pursuing pilot achieves two successes with a piloting

ability roll, so the distance is narrowed to short shoot range. Some passengers on the two vehicles exchange shots at one another. Then, nearer the end of the turn, the fleeing pilot's one success is applied, and the distance increases again to long shoot range. On the next turn, the pursuing pilot manages to achieve three successes and closes the range to brawl. The pilot of the over vehicle fails a piloting ability roll, so the range remains at brawl at turn's end. At this moment, both pilots must make an immediate piloting roll to avoid crashing. Both succeed, so the chase continues.

Passengers making attacks from a moving vehicle suffer a penalty modifier of 1 to 3 points, as judged by the game master. People making attacks against

passengers on a moving vehicle also suffer a penalty modifier of from 1 to 3 points. These two penalties are cumulative for passengers shooting from one moving vehicle at passengers on another.

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Carrying Stuff

Within the Equanimity, biomechs carry what they are assigned, and nothing more. Gear that they will be needing on a long-term basis is usually grafted to their bodies permanently. When anything else must be transported—a crate of bolts, for example, or a coil of fiber-optic cable—if no conveyor belt or vehicle is available, and they cannot be teleported or moved telekinetically, they must be carried by hand. There are no pockets, bags, or equipment belts to speak of within the hive.

Rogue biomechs, on the other hand, may find themselves having to remain on the move, and in need of some way of toting food, water, and extra equipment. Among rogues, then, the idea of portable containers—water bottles, equipment pouches, and backpacks, for instance—can be crucial. Because the idea is so alien, however, conceiving of that first pouch may require a cleverness roll (at the game master's discretion). Finding suitable materials afterward is no

great problem; it's easy enough to convert a jacket to a pack, for example—just sew up the waist and tie the sleeves together in a loop to make a strap.

Players should keep the amount of gear their characters carry within reason. The game master is the final judge as to whether a rogue is pushing the limits, and is free to impose penalty modifiers to the dice rolls of characters who seem overburdened.

Learning from Experience

A player may spend experience points to have his or her character gain new focus abilities, change focus abilities to prior ability status, or return an

ability from prior to focus. It costs three experience points to make a previously unfamiliar ability a focus ability.

Changing a prior ability to a focus ability, or vice versa, costs two points.

Characters can

spend experience to change their abilities any time they have a moment to rest and think for a bit.

As the game proceeds, characters may also see in action abilities they have never imagined before. (Some game-master characters know secrets the heroes have yet to learn.)

As the game proceeds, characters may also see in action abilities they have never imagined before. (Some game-master characters know secrets the heroes have yet to learn.) In order to add such an ability to the character sheet, the character has to succeed at a cleverness roll while taking time to rest and think. Once the ability is listed on the sheet, the character can spend points as usual to make it a new focus ability.

Reacting from Experience

Experience tends to make a person wiser, not just better educated. For that reason, in *Zero*, experience points can be spent to avoid points of damage during play, on a one-to-one basis. This can include stun damage taken when characters strain themselves for a heroic effort.

Benefits of Experience

So far, we have discussed how to go about creating a new character, and how to use that character's abilities. But characters can grow and learn as they undergo adventures. To represent this, characters in *Zero* are awarded "experience points" as they are used in play. These experience points can then be used to change the character's abilities.

Each game session, a character gains 1 experience point automatically. If the character faced a particularly difficult situation, the game master may decide to award 1 additional experience point or (rarely) 2. A character may also gain 1 experience point if he or she did something particularly entertaining, at the game master's discretion. As experience points are gained and spent, keep track of their changing total in the space provided on the character sheet.

CHAPTER 04: RULES OF COMBAT

An important part of any adventure is action, and there isn't any more exciting action than a battle. But handling combat in a game requires a few specialized rules. That's what this section is all about.

Life and Damage

Each character in *Zero* has a pool of 10 life points. Once a character has suffered 10 points of damage, he or she is out of the action. The type of damage determines the character's exact condition. A character who has suffered only *stun* damage is *unconscious* after that damage reaches 10 points. A character who has suffered only *wounds* is *dying* after the damage reaches 10 points. If a character has suffered both types of damage, he or she falls unconscious when the total of stuns and wounds together reach 10 points or more.

Life points are represented on the character sheet as a "life line," consisting of pair of arrows containing 10 boxes each. The left-hand arrow points downward and is marked "Stuns." The other points upward and is marked "Wounds." As a character suffers stun damage, it is marked on the left-hand arrow, beginning at the top and proceeding toward the bottom. As a character suffers wound damage, it is marked on the second arrow, beginning at the bottom side and proceeding upward. If the wound tally ever reaches the left end of its arrow, the character is dying. If the stun tally ever reaches the right end of its arrow, or if the two tallies meet or cross, the character falls unconscious.

Stun Damage and Healing

Stunning damage is light trauma—bruised muscles, shallow cuts and abrasions, and simple exhaustion. (It can also be the result of "Heroic Efforts," as explained under "Using the Dice," above.) Each point of stun requires a full hour of rest for the character to recover. As a character recovers from stun damage, the lower-most marks are erased from the character sheet first.

Wound Damage and Healing

Wounds are severe trauma—broken bones, bruised organs, serious lacerations, deep burns, and so on. Recovering from these kinds of damage takes some time. Each point of wound requires a full day of rest—with sufficient food, water, warmth, and security—to be healed. Without such rest, a point of wound requires twice as long to heal. The medicine ability can be used to speed healing along; see the ability description above for an explanation. As a character recovers from wounds, the top-most ones are erased from the character first.

Regaining Consciousness

When a character recovers from enough of his or her damage that neither arrow is entirely marked, and the lines of boxes no longer meet or cross, that character recovers consciousness once again. In other words, if the total number of stuns and wounds together are less than ten, the character regains consciousness.

Wound Penalties

A character who has suffered wounds has a more difficult time performing actions. To represent this, apply the total number of wounds as a penalty to the result of every dice roll that character makes, after the dice have been multiplied. For example, a focus ability roll of 3 and 4 would normally result in a 12, but a character with 4 wounds would lower this result to 8 instead.

Time and Combat

Combat in *Zero* is fast and furious. There is no time for careful planning once battle is joined. Such preparation is for before a battle. Once combat begins in earnest, characters decide moment by moment what action to take next, and just hope that they are successful in the long run.

Combat Turns

To manage the action of combat, battles are divided into turns. Each combat turn in *Zero* represents about two seconds of time spent in battle, although resolving the actions of that two seconds usually takes a bit longer in real time.

Number of Actions

A character can attempt to perform *one action per combat turn*. As a general rule, an action is defined as anything that requires dice to be rolled for an ability use. Anything that does not require an ability roll does not count as an action, for purposes of this rule. Shouting, "Look out!" for example, is not considered an action, though trying to convince a character to surrender would be. Taking a step or two forward or backward is not considered an action, but running across a room would be. (See "Distance and Combat," below.) This means that a character can take a step or two and speak a few words while taking an action in combat.

Declaring Actions

At the beginning of each combat turn, the game master secretly decides what any non-player characters present intend to do this turn. Then the game master asks each of the players what his or her character intends to do this turn. No dice are rolled until everyone has declared an action for the turn. But don't hesitate too long, or the game master may decide that your character spends the turn frozen with uncertainty.

Order of Actions

Once the game master knows what actions everyone intends for the turn, it is time to roll the dice to find out how well those actions succeed. But it is also important to know exactly *when* each action occurs. *During combat, actions occur in order, starting with the highest dice result and counting backward from there.* (This is the same dice result used to resolve the action itself.) A character with a roll of 36 would go first, for example, followed by anyone with a 30, then 25, and so on down to a result of 0.

Generally, this means that the most successful actions happen first, followed by the next most successful, and so on. That's because most characters usually attempt combat actions using a focus ability, in which case success depends upon rolling high. But this isn't always the case, and it is entirely possible for a character to fail an action near the beginning of the turn or succeed at one near the end.

If a declared action is negated by an action happening previous to it, that declared action is simply voided, and the character with the negated action does nothing this turn. For instance, a character preparing to shoot a target might find that target suddenly teleported away, before the attacker can fire. Unless the target remains within the attacker's sight, the attack is simply lost, and the attacker loses his or her chance to act for this turn. Don't worry, though—combat turns happen so quickly that a character who loses an action in this way will soon have another chance to act.

Distance and Combat

Distance is an important consideration during combat. Players have to know what opponents are within range to attack or be attacked, and how far they can move this turn. Often, the game master will simply describe things by the general range classifications defined below. This works well for many situations, where the sense of drama is more important than pickiness with mechanics. But sometimes, for the sake of clarity, it may be helpful to keep track of exact positions and distances covered, perhaps even on a map. In those cases, use the specific measures defined below.

Attack Ranges

Zero classifies attacks by four different ranges—brawl, throw, shoot, and view. These loosely match the four basic combat abilities—brawl, throw, shoot, and combat psionics. In the ability descriptions, above, the combat abilities are listed in alphabetical order. Here, ranges are discussed in order of increasing distance from the attacker.

Brawl: Anything within striking reach of fist, foot, club, or blade is considered to be at brawl range. This is roughly anything within 2 meters of the attacker. Any sort of attack is possible at this distance; characters can brawl, throw, shoot, or make psionic attacks.

Throw: If a target can be hit with a thrown object, it is within throw range. Throw range extends to roughly 20 meters from the attacker. This is too far away for brawling attacks, but any other sort of attack can be made: throw, shoot, or psionic.

Shoot: Shooting attacks are constrained as much by visibility as by the physical limitations of weapons. Beam weapons (lasers and such) are more accurate than projectiles (bullets, propelled grenades, and the like), because they aren't bent by gravity (at least not noticeably). But no matter what the weapon, a human-

sized target is difficult to aim at beyond a few hundred meters, though scopes and electronic sensors can make a big difference. In *Zero*, shooting range runs to about 200 meters from the attacker, unless the shot is aimed with some sort of scope. (See the gear list for examples.)

View: Anything within view is within range of psionic attacks. This makes combat psionics of use while targets are beyond normal attack range.

Movement in Combat

As mentioned above, a character can move a couple of steps (up to 2 meters) each combat turn without it being considered an action. Characters who want to move further than that must spend the turn doing nothing but moving, and must make a quickness ability roll to do so. For each success level gained with this roll, a character can add 2 meters to his or her normal movement. For instance, a character who gains two success levels on the quickness roll could move a total of 6 meters that turn.

Attacks and Damage

In *Zero*, every weapon and attack type has a damage rating. (See the attacks table, below.) This is the amount of damage done for each level of success on the attack roll. Most attacks do both stun damage and wound damage, so an attack with a damage rating of 1, for instance, would cause 1 stun and 1 wound per success level rolled. To determine the actual damage rating of a particular attack roll, then, multiply the attack's damage rating times the number of success levels rolled; the target suffers that amount of stun damage and the same amount of wound damage.

Some attack types do stun damage only. They are noted by the word "stun" in parentheses after their damage rating on the attacks table. Some others do wound damage only. They are noted by the word "wound" in parentheses after their damage rating. Unarmed attacks do either stun or wound, at the attacker's option, but not both. All others do both stun and wound damage, in equal amounts.

Defensive Reactions

It happens all the time: Just as an enemy is about to shoot, a player asks, "Can't my character jump out of the way?" Well, we aim to please, so here are special rules for defending against attacks.

Whenever characters are attacked, they normally have a chance to defend, assuming they see the attack coming and have time to react. Characters being attacked from ambush may not realize that the attack is coming, and the game master may decide that they have no chance to defend.

An attempt to defend happens just as the attack is delivered, regardless of the normal sequence of events for that combat turn. It doesn't matter what action the defender declared and rolled for at the beginning of the turn, or whether that action has already occurred or is still waiting to happen. Defensive reactions are determined immediately as the attack is declared.

Defensive Choice

Depending upon the situation, the defense may negate the target's earlier declared action, or it may leave the target free to continue that action. It all depends upon what choice the target makes about the incoming attack. The choices are "tough it out" or "defend."

Tough It Out: Sometimes, the most heroic thing to do is to ignore the attack and continue with what you are doing. This is the "damn the torpedoes; full speed ahead" strategy. This choice is typically made when the target declared a very important action at the beginning of the turn, has rolled fairly well for that action, wants to continue that action at all costs, and realizes that he or she can survive the damage of the attack. Of course, as usual, any damage suffered in the attack now modifies the dice roll for the target's declared action, changing when the target will act this round and perhaps how well the action succeeds.

Defend: At any point in the turn, as a character is being attacked, he or she may decide to abandon any pending action for this turn, and concentrate solely upon defending. This allows the target to make multiple defenses in the turn; *the player rolls a new defense against each attack*. Targets may also choose this strategy if their declared action for the turn has already taken place. That's one of the benefits of being fast.

Types of Defense

The type of defense to be rolled depends upon the type of attack being made.

Against brawling attacks, the brawl ability is rolled for defense.

Against throwing attacks, shooting attacks, and combat telekinesis, the agility ability is rolled to dodge.

Against other psionic attacks, the target rolls the willpower ability to resist.

Effect of Defense

Each level of success gained on a defense roll counters one level of success on the attack roll, thereby reducing any damage done by the attack.

Second Wind

At the beginning of any combat turn, a player may declare that, as an action this turn, his or her character will try to "shake off" some of the stun damage suffered during the current combat. Recovering from stun damage in this way requires a strength or willpower ability roll (players' choice). The character regains one point of stun damage immediately when the roll is made, plus one point for each success level gained on the roll. (A roll of two success levels would restore 3 points of stun, for instance.) Characters can try to "get their second wind" in this way any number of turns during a combat, spending an action to do so each time.

Once combat has ended, every character can roll twice for "second wind," once using strength and once using willpower.

Keep in mind, though, that only stun damage suffered during the current combat can be negated in this way. Any stun damage a character had before the combat began remains with him or her until recovered from normally.

Occasionally, the game master may allow "second wind" rolls in other circumstances, when characters have suffered damage in some other way, or have exerted themselves on a particular task and now have time to rest.

Body Armor

Within the hive, body armor refers to plates of a protective fiber grafted into the possessor's skin itself. The rating of the armor (1 point, 2 point, or 3 point) is subtracted from the total damage done by each weapon attacking the character. For example, a soldier with 2-point body armor, if shot with a blaster for one success level, would reduce the damage suffered to 0. If that same blaster hit him for three success levels, a total of 6 points, the 2-point body armor would reduce the total damage rating to 4.

Weapon Descriptions

The attacks table lists the most significant fact of various weapon types—namely the damage done by each. The descriptions that follow, in alphabetical order, provide other important information.

Note that most of these weapon categories actually cover a broad array of specific weapons. An ax, for instance, might be any sort of heavy blade designed for swinging and hacking. The exact description for any particular character is left to the player.

Also, keep in mind that for characters in *Zero*, particularly for soldiers, often these weapons are not just carried, but are physically grafted to the body in some way. This is especially true of weapons that are normally used two-handed. Typically, for such weapons, one hand and forearm is removed from the

Attacks Table

Brawling Attacks

Fist or foot	1 (stun or wound)
Neural Whip	3 (stun)
Club	1
Ax	2
Knife	2 (wound)
Spear*	1
Sword*	3 (wound)
Power Blade*	4 (wound)

Throwing Attacks

Stone	1
Knife	2 (wound)
Spear	1
Stone Block	2

Shooting Attacks

Stunner	3 (stun)
Blaster	2
Pulse Cannon*	3**
Shotgun*	variable: 4/3/2**†
Flamer*††	4 (wound)

*This weapon either takes two hands to use, or it is grafted on to the user in place of a hand and forearm.

**Success levels with this weapon can be focused on one target, or divided among adjacent targets.

†Shotgun damage is 4 at brawl range, 3 at throw range, and 2 at shoot range. At brawling range, its success levels cannot be divided among adjacent targets.

††The flamer is fired using the shooting ability, but its range is limited to throwing distance.

user, and the weapon is affixed in their place. By grafting the weapon permanently to the body in this way, it can be used while the other hand remains free.

Ax

For close, deadly fighting, a weapon with a heavy, bladed end can be just the thing. The use of an ax in battle relies more upon strength than finesse, which makes it less flashy than a sword, but still quite dangerous. The damage inflicted is as much a matter of crushing impact as of cutting.

Zero's soldiers may have use of a wide range of weapons with heavy blades designed for swinging rather than thrusting. Most of them consist of a pole-like extension with a bladed end, though some are more like a machete, and some bear spikes rather than actual blades.

Blaster

Any sort of one-handed beam weapon, from laser pistol to particle gun, falls under the category of blaster. All are powered by battery, and require no other ammunition. Because they fire in a straight line, rather than the curve of a projectile weapon, they are relatively easy to aim and have virtually unlimited range. (A blaster with a scope can hit a target even at view range.) But dirty, smoky, or mist-filled air diffuses the beam, reducing its damage rating by 1 to 3 points. In a thick fog, for instance, a blaster is pretty much useless.

Hive members who are issued a blaster often have the weapon built into or onto one forearm, with the barrel projecting from the wrist, either along the inside of the arm, or over the back of the hand.

Club

Nearly any object can be used as a club. It just needs to be hard enough to cause damage and long enough to add extra impact to an attacker's swing. Although a club doesn't do as much damage as a blade or ax of equal length, it is somewhat easier to use, because the attacker need not worry about making sure it is facing any particular right way.

Clubs grafted onto soldiers are typically retractable along the back of a forearm.

Fist or Foot

Most of the time, an attack by a fist or foot is not deadly, although it can cause considerable pain and stun damage. A character can, however, choose to do deadly damage with fists or feet, causing wounds rather than stun damage.

Flamer

The flamer is a bulky but deadly weapon with a horrifying effect. It consists of a gun tube connected to two pressurized tanks of chemicals which combust when mixed in a spray from the nozzle. The flaming mixture sticks to whatever it is sprayed across, causing intense heat damage, and setting fire to any other combustible materials it touches. Although the weapon is fired using the shooting ability, the reach of the spray is limited to throwing range.

In the hive, soldiers with flamers typically have had one hand and arm replaced with the weapon. Tubing then leads to chemical tanks on the soldier's back, where the flamer's fuel is stored. Usually, these tanks are well armored, to protect them from puncture or accidental ignition and fatal explosion.

Knife

This category includes all sorts of short, one-handed blades designed for stabbing, slashing, and possibly throwing. Besides knives, such things as daggers, bayonets, and throwing stars fall into this classification, and soldiers find use for them all.

Knives designed for brawling attacks only may be built to extend from a limb. Blades designed for throwing are not permanently attached, of course. Often, a shooting weapon will have a blade built onto the end, for use in close-quarter combat.

A breeder's scalpels could also be pressed into service as a knife, though such rough work would certainly ruin its fine edge. Some technician's tools could serve as makeshift blades, as well, though again, they might be unfit for their normal purpose afterwards.

Neural Whip

This brawling weapon is basically a whip that can conduct a stunning electrical charge. The lash itself does minimal damage, but its length is studded with metal buttons connected by internal wiring to a battery charge in the whip's handle. Whenever at least two buttons along the lash come into contact with flesh, the circuit is completed, delivering the charge.

Soldiers with a neural whip grafted onto an arm are able to retract and coil the whip safely within a storage space upon command.

Power Blade

A power blade is a large cutting weapon, technologically enhanced to better cut through tough materials. It may be a chainsaw, a vibroblade, a spinning circular saw, or even an electrically rigidified

monofilament wire. In any case, the purpose is to do greater damage to the target. This also makes power blades bulkier and clumsier than normal blades, and dependent upon energy recharges.

A power blade must be wielded with both hands, unless it is grafted onto the user in place of a hand and forearm.

Pulse Cannon

Basically a larger, two-handed version of the blaster, a pulse cannon can fire multiple shots within bare seconds, hitting the same target several times in an instant, or spread across adjacent targets. Some pulse cannons bear multiple barrels, cycling shots through them in sequence, so that each barrel has a chance to cool between rounds. Others circulate coolant around a single barrel.

As with other normally two-handed weapons, within Zero's hive, pulse cannons are usually grafted onto a soldier in place of one hand and forearm.

Shotgun

A two-handed projectile weapon of ancient design, the shotgun fires a cluster of pellets at high velocity. This makes the weapon relatively easy to aim—just point it in the general direction of the target and fire. The spreading cluster can also hit multiple targets at longer ranges, though this spreads the damage more thinly as well. At brawling range, the cluster is more focused, doing greater damage to a single target.

Again, within the hive, shotguns are generally affixed permanently to the bearer, in place of a hand and forearm.

Spear

In its simplest form, a spear is basically a small blade on the end of a pole. The pole provides longer reach than the blade alone, and also provides for two-handed swings and thrusts, giving more power to a strike. Bayonets mounted on two-handed guns are also treated as spears for purposes of damage.

Within the hive, the spear is the only two-handed weapon not generally grafted directly to the user's body. Instead, it is usually kept separate, allowing it to be thrown if necessary.

As indicated on the attacks table, spears are considered two-handed when used for brawling attacks, but are thrown one-handed.

Stone

This entry includes rocks and other hard objects that can be held in one hand and thrown. The damage rating is based upon a roughly fist-sized object. Smaller stones may do only stun damage, while larger ones could have a higher damage rating, at the game master's option.

Stunner

This type of energy weapon sends an electrical charge down the ionized tunnel of a particle beam. The particle beam itself is of low enough energy that the target suffers no wounding damage. Most stunners are one-handed weapons, but some are larger, allowing more room for energy storage, meaning more shots between recharges. Others may be connected by cables to a battery pack on the user's waist or back.

When grafted onto the body, a stunner is mounted in the same way as a blaster. (See above.)

Sword

For purposes of this game, a sword is any long weapon consisting mostly of a blade, primarily for two-handed use. A sword does damage by thrusting (puncture) and slashing (cut) attacks, rather than relying upon impact. In the hands of an expert, it is a graceful yet frightening weapon.

Many of Zero's soldiers bear swords grafted onto one arm, allowing for their use one-handed. Most are at least partially retractable.

CHAPTER 05: OTHER GEAR

Besides the gear that each caste begins with, and the weapons listed in the combat chapter, there are many other types of gear that player characters may come across during the course of play. The following are some examples.

Biohazard Suit

This bulky suit is designed to protect the wearer in any hazardous environment. It acts as 5-point body armor against flame, chemical, and radiation damage, and possesses a rechargeable air supply capable of sustaining the user for one hour in the most toxic of environments.

Booster Drug

This chemical acts like adrenaline when injected into a biomech. While it is in effect, the character gains a bonus of 2 points to the lower die of every ability roll. The drug effects last for one minute (30 combat turns), before wearing off. Then the user suffers 5 points of stun damage.

Chameleon Suit

For those occasions when stealth is important, the hive outfits some soldiers with self-camouflaging suits. Sensors on all sides of the suit read the background around the wearer and cause a color change on their opposite side, to match that background. The result isn't quite invisibility, but it is still quite effective, especially at a distance.

Sighted creatures attempting to view a stationary chameleon-suited character must make a cleverness roll, and they suffer a penalty modifier of 1 point at brawling range, 2 points at throwing range, 3 points at shooting range, and 4 points at view range. If the target is moving, the penalty modifier is reduced by 1 point (which means, for instance, that there is no penalty at brawling range).

Combat Wiring

Rather than rely solely upon purely biological reflexes, Zero maintains a limited number of soldiers whose nervous systems have been enhanced cybernetically. This combat wiring consists of a set of fiber-optic nerve bundles to the most significant muscle groups, linked to a cluster of computer chips which have been programmed for rapid response to attacks against the individual. The result is enhanced defensive ability during combat. But biomechs who receive this implantation have to train to work with it, to learn to recognize when the system is kicking in, and to relinquish their control to that of the program. Resisting the program results in severe muscle cramps, or even tearing damage, as the body strives to follow two conflicting commands.

In game terms, a combat-wired character automatically receives a 2-point bonus modifier whenever specifically defending (using brawling or agility) against a physical attack he or she can see. (The chip cluster is wired to the optic nerves.) But the resultant strain on these major muscle groups results in a point of stun damage the moment that defense is rolled.

Diving Suit

This suit allows its wearer to travel underwater in relative safety and comfort. The suit covers its user from head to foot, protecting him or her from extremes of water temperature, and providing webs between the fingers and extending from the toes to aid in swimming. It supplies oxygen by means of a bioelectronic gill array along both sides of the torso, delivered through microscopic filaments directly into the user's bloodstream, also disposing of carbon dioxide waste. The suit conducts an electrical charge to paralyze the user's diaphragm, to inhibit breathing. While the result is not entirely pleasant, it is quite effective.

Exoskeleton

This powered metal framework is form-fitted to the user's spine and limbs, and wired to the user's central nervous system (through the spinal cord), enhancing strength, agility, and quickness. The wearer gains a bonus of 1 point to the lower die of all rolls made for those abilities, and increases the damage rating of his or her brawling and throwing attacks by 1 point as well. Because of the invasive wiring, however, the wearer also suffers a penalty modifier of 1 point to all other rolls.

Attaching or removing the suit requires ten cumulative successes of the electronics and/or medicine abilities.

Firefly Suit

For work around light-sensitive equipment, or long-term activity in other dark areas, some techs are outfitted in a special suit of bioluminescent fabric, with light-intensifier eyepieces. When warmed to body temperature by contact with the wearer, the suit gives off a low level glow, like that of a firefly or glowworm, which is enhanced by the lenses, allowing sight well enough for coarse work. The images viewed are too grainy to allow for fine manipulation, however. Still, because there is no power pack necessary, and the chemicals virtually never wear out, the suit can be of great use for exploration of dark, abandoned regions of the hive.

Flutter

The flutter is a repulsor-drive vehicle roughly the size and shape of a motorcycle. It is capable of carrying up to three biomechs, one behind another, at speeds up to 150 kilometers per hour (roughly 2.5 kilometers per minute, or 42 meters per second).

The hive does not maintain many of these vehicles, but does keep a few in operation for Zero's personal command, when the queen desires rapid delivery of some object and would rather not risk a powerful teleporter biomech with the task.

Gargoyle Suit

This is one of Queen Zero's most prized pieces of equipment. It consists of a pair of biomechanical wings, a telekinetic proto-brain, and a light-absorbing suit of artificial skin to power them.

Installing the suit on a subject requires major cybernetic surgery (ten successes each with the medicine and electronics abilities to make the necessary neural and skeletal connections, rolled once per hour). But once it is attached, it allows the wearer to fly like a bird. The suit's proto-brain provides just enough telekinetic lift to counter the user's body weight, and the wings provide the necessary movement.

Users of this suit must be trained and practiced in its operation. (Treat this as a separate "gargoyle suit" ability.)

Grapnel Gun

Normally emplaced on a forearm, this device allows its user to project a grapnel hook with a cable line attached up to 200 meters. If the gun is grafted to the user, he or she can mentally control the grapnel's prongs, extending or retracting them at will to lodge or release the grapnel as necessary. A motorized winch within the gun can haul up to 500 kilograms of weight, retracting the cable at a speed of one meter per second.

If fired as a weapon, the grapnel has a damage rating of 1. Before it can be fired again, the grapnel must be retrieved, which requires one combat round.

Ground Car

Most travel within the hive complex is by foot (or personal telekinesis and teleportation), with powered walkways and elevators as a back-up. But when necessity calls for the rapid transport of bulky equipment, specialized materials, or a dozen important biomechs over a distance, the hive occasionally uses wheeled vehicles referred to simply as ground cars. Some are air-tight and possess limited-range jump jets for traversing hostile environments, such as crossing a lava-riddled cavern, or traveling through a subterranean lake.

Each ground car is roughly ten meters long and wide, and three to four meters tall. Although enclosed, most possess ports that can be opened on most sides, and have a railed area atop the hull, where extra gear or passengers can be placed. Built more for bulk transportation and endurance than for speed, a hoverpod can attain speeds of up to 100 kilometers per hour (nearly two kilometers per minute, or 28 meters per second). The vehicles are powered by a hydrogen-burning engine, and can

operate for 100 hours at a stretch on a single tank of fuel. Many are mounted with an electrolysis system for releasing hydrogen from normal water, in case of the need for an emergency refueling.

HUD Visor

The HUD visor (short for Heads Up Display) fits over the wearer's face to provide the very best in target acquisition. Capable of infrared, light intensifying, and even radar sensing and computer assistance, the visor gives its user a bonus of 1 point on each die of a shooting roll, before multiplication. The visor takes the place of any other targeting device, however, and cannot be used in conjunction with them.

Normally, these visors are issued only to soldiers with names of three-digit classification or higher.

Infrared Eye

This optical device can be found on occasion implanted on a soldier or technician in place of a normal eye. It allows the user to see heat patterns up to shooting range in distance, sometimes even behind thin obstructions.

Light Spur

Drones and techs digging new tunnels for the hive often have need of portable lights to dispel the subterranean darkness. In most cases, lamps are built into their work suits, projecting as knobs from the shoulders or hood of their work suits, thereby leaving their hands free. These light spurs contain powerful elements capable of illuminating up to 100 meters in distance, energized by long-lasting batteries built into their base. Some are designed to illuminate in all directions, but most are focused forward, to light the bearer's work.

Often, soldiers are equipped with light spurs as well, for use in scouting outside the occupied hive, or for illuminating their assigned posts in case of local power failure.

Light-Intensifier Goggles

This piece of eye wear collects the ambient light in a dark area and enhances it to the wearer's view, allowing sight in all but the very darkest of locations. The result does not give perfect vision—the images seen are fuzzy, like a poorly received video broadcast—but the goggles are good enough to allow for travel and combat with no other light.

Motion Sensor

Not all beings in Zero's subterranean world register psionically. That's certainly true of purely mechanical creatures, but many animals have insufficient mental activity to be read by the telepathic powers of the Equanimity. Consequently, teams of biomechs assigned to patrol or hunting duty are typically issued an electronic motion sensor to help ensure that they do not fall prey of these things unknowingly.

A motion sensor is a hand-held device shaped like a slightly flattened sphere roughly 30 centimeters in diameter. The sensor dish itself is built into one flattened face, and the other bears a radar-like screen. To use the device, the wielder must hold it at roughly head height between both hands, sensor dish pointed outward. It operates in a ninety-degree arc, detecting the motion of a walking human at up to 100 meters distance, even around corners or behind light obstructions (up to and including thin plastic paneling). The sensor works by picking up the slightest variations in air pressure (basically sounds far too faint to be heard) and translating them into a pip on the screen, registering approximate size and distance. Direction must be gauged by the orientation of the device itself. The larger the creature and the faster it moves, the more accurate the reading and the greater the distance of the detection.

Psi Chip

A flat, metal disk roughly two centimeters in diameter, the psi chip is implanted in the center of a biomech's forehead, where it works to boost its wearer's psionic abilities. It is smooth on one side, but bears scores of microscopic filaments on the other, which work their way through the skin and skull to root themselves in the forebrain. The disk then works to correlate the brain's psionic efforts, enhancing the results. Once implanted, the chip cannot be removed without surgery, requiring three levels of success with the medicine ability, rolling once per hour at maximum.

A character with a psi chip receives a bonus modifier of 2 when using psionic abilities. But by focusing concentration upon psionic powers, the psi chip wears the user out more quickly, causing him or her to spend 2 points to initiate a psionic power, rather than the normal 1 point.

Psi Lens

The psi lens is a strange-looking helmet with a large, lens-like face plate. It contains a complex and finicky set of electronic webwork attuned specifically to its wearer's brain configuration, to boost those brain waves involved in the use of psionic powers. As a result, the wearer treats all prior psionic abilities as focus abilities, and all unfamiliar psionic abilities as prior abilities. (In effect, the lens allows the user to maintain a lower focus rating, while still having a wide range of psionic abilities available.)

The only known examples of psi lenses are used by a special set of psionic soldiers known only as the cyberkillers. These biomechs serve Queen Zero directly as bodyguards and assassins. (See chapter eight for a description). The highest honor possible for a soldier of the hive is to be inducted into this group. Rumor is that the cyberkillers are capable of psionic powers unknown to other members of the hive. Apparently, Queen Zero keeps these individuals linked to her alone, separately from the Equanimity.

Targeting Scope

Targeting scopes are designed to increase a user's accuracy with firearms. They telescopically enhance a target's image, allowing accurate fire beyond normal ranges. In game terms, they increase the range of stunners, blasters, and pulse cannons beyond "shooting" to "view."

Within the hive, targeting scopes come in two varieties. For weapons which are grafted to the user's body, the scope is actually implanted over one eye

and is connected by a computer linkage to the weapon itself. As a result, the user can sight down the barrel of the weapon without raising it to eye level. For weapons not grafted to the user, the scope is mounted atop the weapon, and must be raised to eye level to be of use.

Web Gun

Sometimes it makes more sense to capture than to kill. Rather than spending endless energy hunting a pest, why not simply collect one specimen and use it to devise a poison for the others? That's what the web gun was designed for. This pistol-sized weapon fires a rubbery ball which ruptures upon contact with a target, splashing strands of adhesive material which solidifies upon exposure to air. The result is a web-like mess which pins the target in place, preventing it from escaping.

Although this is a shooting weapon, the effective range is limited to throwing distance. One level of success with the gun is sufficient to prevent a target from fleeing, but leaves it free to continue making attacks of its own. Three levels of success with the gun (separately or cumulative) paralyze the target completely, preventing it from moving and from making any physical attacks. To break free from the web, the target must accumulate more levels of success on a strength ability roll than were gained with the gun's attack. The web can be cut, instead, requiring one combat turn for each success level gained with the gun.

The gun holds enough ammunition for six shots between reloads.

CHAPTER 06: THE MASTER'S ROLE

The game master of any role-playing game has a big job. He or she has to be part game rules expert, part scenario writer, part movie director, part club organizer, and usually even host for the rest of the gaming group. Fortunately, this big job has big rewards. There is something very satisfying about providing friends with an opportunity to have some fun, watching their characters work together to solve problems you've designed, playing the parts of all the secondary characters their heroes come across, and exciting and scaring them with your storytelling powers as you describe the sights those heroes behold.

Some Practical Matters

If you've been a game master of other games before, then you already have some idea of how to go about running a role-

playing campaign. And you probably have some tricks of your own that you've picked up by experience.

But if this is your first time as game master, you may

not even know what a campaign is. (It's how role-players refer to an ongoing series of adventures, just as a TV series is made up of individual episodes.) So in the next few paragraphs, we're going to give you some condensed advice about how to get a regular *Zero* game group up and running, and how to keep it going. Even if you have been a game master before, you might pick up another trick or two by browsing those paragraphs. You'll certainly learn some of the presuppositions behind the game.

The game master of any role-playing game has a big job.... Fortunately, this big job has big rewards.

Rules Referee

Role-playing in *Zero* is not primarily about rules. It is primarily about drama and action. But rules have to play their part. Game rules provide the necessary structure for players to make intelligent decisions about what their characters will do in a given situation. As you run adventures, you may find some players who try to manipulate the rules so that their characters always benefit, regardless of any sense of drama or reality, and other players who couldn't care less about the rules, who expect you to bend them to give their characters a break. As the referee, if you want everyone to be satisfied in the long run, you have to walk the line between those two extremes.

If you let the "rules lawyers" have their way, game sessions become sterile at best, unbelievable at worst.

The fact is, there are too many possibilities in role-playing adventures for any set of rules to cover them all.

(That's what board games are for—to set up a nicely "walled-off" situation and treat it with hard-and-fast rules.) As a role-playing game master,

then, you will have to make judgment calls from time to time, in what you view to be the spirit of the rules, just as referees do at sporting events.

On the other hand, if you get into the habit of ignoring the rules when the dice rolls go bad for a player character, or to save a precious villain when your own dice are "cold," pretty soon the players will begin to feel that their characters' decisions and actions make no real difference in the long run. Part of the fun to be had in role-playing is in the surprise of good breaks and bad, and how the heroes deal with them.

It is best, then, if you avoid either extreme. Let the game rules work for you, providing a framework you can build upon. Interpret them as necessary to cover unusual situations that arise during play. Extrapolate from them when you need to, for the purpose of drama and fun. Expand and invent, but don't cheat.

Scenario Writer

In fiction, plots arise out of people and problems. A writer defines a central character or two, then presents them with a problem, and they react according to their natures. The actions they take, and whatever results come from those actions, are what plot is all about.

In a role-playing game, the central characters belong to the players. They are the ones whose actions will determine how the plot unfolds. What the game master provides in preparing a scenario is the central problem or group of problems those characters must face. Much of the game master's fun lies in discovering how those heroes will react. The more experienced the game master, the more he or she can predict what player characters might do in a given situation. But there is always an element of surprise, often a very strong one. Once the player characters react to the situation, the game master has to react to those heroes' actions, deciding how the situation changes. And then the players must decide how their characters respond to the changing situation. Which leads to further reaction from the game master, and so on. The plot begins rolling along, carrying everyone with it on a journey of discovery, until it finally reaches some resolution.

(True, the heroes aren't the only characters. Often, the central problem involves a character or creature on the game master's side—an antagonist to the players' protagonists. But for the purposes of role-playing games, we can consider any game master personae to be part of the problem, rather than characters in their own right, at least for now.)

During play, the players have their character sheets to fall back upon as a basis for their characters' actions. They can point to specific abilities, gear, and even attitudes when necessary to decide an action.

The game master needs some similar preparation in designing his or her scenario before play begins. The next chapter of this book explains this in more detail. But for now, it is enough to know that the game master will need to have prepared a few things to fall back upon during play:

- a description (at least a note or two) about the main problem the heroes will face;
- some statistics for the central character or creature involved in that problem;
- basic stats for other beings the heroes are likely to encounter;
- and sketch maps of significant places the heroes will probably be during the adventure.

With these things at hand, the game master is ready to play the part of the situation the heroes find themselves facing.

Movie Director

We say that the game master's job is part movie director, because the purpose of the game is for everyone to experience a shared story as it develops, and the more dramatic the story, the more fun everyone will have. The director of a movie takes a basic script, picks locations to set it in, oversees the production of costumes and backdrops, and then guides the actors through their parts, weaving them all into the best film possible. Similarly, a game master takes a basic adventure script, describes the settings and visual details to the players, and integrates their characters' actions, to create the best shared drama possible. Even if using an adventure setting someone else has written (like the one in the back of this book), it is the game master who brings the story to life, just as a movie director bears the primary responsibility for a film.

Actors in films sometimes improvise their lines a bit, and in some cases they may even suggest changes to the script, based upon their feelings about their character. That's even more the case in a role-playing game, where players actually invent their heroes' lines and actions. Some players may even suggest particular events or plot developments beyond their character's direct control, or maybe just describe a scene as they see it. A good game master encourages this sort of thing for two reasons: first, it helps involve those players even more deeply in the story, making their experience all the more vivid; second, it takes some of the burden off the game master's shoulders, letting someone else share the work of describing things, and further spurring the game master's creativity.

Club Organizer and Host

Who is it who puts together a group of friends to play *Zero* in the first place? It's usually a game master, of course. He or she invites a group of people to play and sets up the schedule of when and where they will all meet. Usually, this means that game groups actually meet in their game master's home. So most game masters find themselves playing host,

as well, making sure that there are drinks and snacks for everyone, that there is plenty of seating and table space, and likely even that there are pencils, dice, and character sheets.

If you're going to be the game master for your group, don't be shy about sharing some of this responsibility. At the very least, ask all the players to bring snacks and drinks to share. Better yet, ask someone else to host the game sessions in his or her home instead, and let that person worry about where everyone is going to sit. That way, you'll leave yourself free to concentrate on preparing the adventures.

One host responsibility you should keep for yourself, however, is to make sure that everyone is having fun. Be sure to give every player's character opportunities to shine during an adventure. That way, you can be certain that your friends will keep coming back for more.

Making Zero Your Own

Zero isn't like any other role-playing game. A look at the pictures and a read through the rules for character creation should make that obvious. The setting is much different from that of other role-playing games, and that has a distinct effect on the game master's job.

Heroes in this game don't take their grandfather's sword and leave the family farm to go adventuring over the hill and through the enchanted woods. Nor do they book passage on a space ship to explore strange new worlds and learn how alien races perceive life. They aren't everyday people who save an unknowing world from supernatural monsters, nor super heroes who protect a knowing world from super villains, nor sleuths working to unravel the sinister plots of master criminals. Characters in *Zero* are different because the game is different. They are innocents in a hard world, unwittingly expelled from a dark Eden to fend for themselves and rediscover just what it is to be human.

So whereas the game master of a fantasy, sci-fi, horror, superior, or mystery game can lift a plot or scene from any number of books or films, the *Zero* game master has only this rule book, its supplements, and his or her imagination to rely upon. The good news is that this

means you can make *Zero* your own in a way game masters of those other genres cannot.

You don't have to worry much about your players' presuppositions, because, like their characters, the players are ignorant as far as the game setting is concerned. They can play the part of these innocents so well

because they don't know what to expect any more than their characters do. The player's section of this book provides them with a solid starting point—it explains who the characters were, what their initial capabilities are, and what has

happened to start them on their journey—but it doesn't tell them what direction they'll be heading from there. As the game master, you will be deciding where those heroes go next, and what opportunities they have to learn along the way. What they do with those opportunities is their business.

Still, if you are going to be tour guide for the players, you need to have some idea of the territory you will be leading them through. So in the next few paragraphs, we're going to fill you in on some basic truths of the setting. To put it another way, we're going to tell you a few secrets and give you the skeleton of an on-going campaign. But we'll leave you the freedom to flesh it out for yourself. As long as you don't violate these few basic tenets, everything in this book and its supplements will work to help you develop your campaign. If you want, you can even violate those basic tenets, if you have a different idea of where things should go in the long run. You'll just have to do more development on your own.

The Zero Story Arc

In any epic tale, there is a basic sequence of events, from start to finish. Along the way, any number of side adventures may occur, giving the characters a chance to develop along the way. Consider the story of King Arthur, for instance. Arthur rises from rather humble beginnings to draw forth the mystical sword that puts him on Britain's throne. Once there, he sets out to bring justice and honor to the land. Along the way, he and his knights have numerous adventures that test their mettle and further develop their character, while illustrating a moral for the reader. Finally, Arthur perishes in battle with Mordred, and Camelot comes to an end. But Arthur's ideals for Camelot continue to echo through the centuries.

There is an epic story arc for *Zero*, as well. It is a story begun within the pages of this book, and continued in its expansions. In the beginning, the player characters are contented members of the Equanimity. Then, unexpectedly, they find themselves outside its telepathic embrace, as unintended outcasts and rogues. Forced to fend for themselves, they begin to rediscover what it is to be individuals, and arguably what it means to be human. Queen Zero's animosity drives them away from the hive, to explore abandoned regions, and they learn secrets that have been lost for centuries. Eventually, they come to realize that there is a world outside the hive, but it is a dangerous one, with strange cultures of its own. In the end, they discover the great danger that forced Zero into hiding in the beginning. Exactly how long the heroes take to complete the entire story arc, and exactly where it ends, will depend upon their decisions and their actions.

Most importantly, though, along the way the heroes will have adventure after adventure. Through them, the players can continue to develop their characters and explore what it means to be individuals in a world that depends upon uniformity.

Who Is Zero?

The most important facts about Zero have already been revealed. She is queen of her hive, not merely its leader, but its very reason for existence.

What the player characters do not know about Zero is that her immortality is dependent upon her continued rule. That makes rogues like them a potential threat to her existence, once she becomes aware of them. In her mind, if these rogues continue to survive, they might cause more biomechs to lapse, and her power could erode as a result. If somehow she were to be overthrown, she would cease to enjoy immortality.

In terms of your campaign, however, we recommend that the player characters never actually meet Zero herself, or at least not until the very end of the campaign. They cannot hope to overthrow her, any more than the ancient Greeks could hope to overthrow Zeus. Instead, Zero should be used as the constant threat to their lives. Regularly, she sends agents to hunt down these rogues and destroy them. This makes Zero the force that pushes the player characters out from the hive, just as their developing curiosity pulls them away.

Those twin forces provide the impetus that keeps the heroes moving, exploring, and learning.

Why the Fall?

Some mysteries are never truly answered. Where do we come from? Why are we here? What is our purpose? Why is there evil? What is good? What is our responsibility to others? What is their responsibility to us? Questions like these have been debated in every human culture since the beginning.

With questions like these, we may guess and suppose, but we may never really know. Still, it seems to be human nature to ask them, and to suggest answers, and to struggle with one another over those proposed answers.

Zero is all about that struggle. Queen Zero has one set of answers, and an entire hive of beings who accept them. But the player characters cannot live by those suppositions any longer, even if they wanted to. Having fallen out of the Equanimity, they now must struggle to survive against it. There is no going back.

Why have the heroes fallen out? That is a question for debate. Perhaps something within these individuals rejected Zero's power. Or maybe Zero is growing old and lax, and the Equanimity itself is dying. Perhaps the Queen enjoys the sport of having her agents hunt down rogues. You and your players may have theories of your own, and you can design adventures based upon any or all of them.

The Primary Rule

Take the ball and run with it. That is the primary rule of running a *Zero* campaign. After you've read all the text and examined all the pictures, let your imagination build upon them. The hive is whatever you imagine it to be.

In olden times, map makers used to detail what lands they could in the center of the map. Then they'd fill the edges of the parchment with illustrations of sea monsters and the notation "Here there be dragons." In this rule book, we give you what detail is possible about the hive itself. But the heroes will be spending most of their time wandering around the edges. What strange sights they see, and what "dragons" they encounter, is up to you.

What the player characters do not know about Zero is that her immortality is dependent upon her continued rule. That makes rogues like them a potential threat to her existence, once she becomes aware of them.

CHAPTER 07: ADVENTURES & CAMPAIGNS

As we said in the last chapter, *Zero* isn't like most role-playing games. This means that designing adventures for *Zero* isn't like designing adventures for other games. And running a *Zero* campaign isn't like running any other campaign.

Probably the single biggest difference is that heroes in *Zero* are alone in a way no other role-playing game characters can be. There is no town or home for them to return to between adventures. There is no society for them to gain status within. Wealth means nothing to these heroes, because there is no place for them to spend it. The very concept of money is completely alien to them. Simple survival is their primary goal; understanding is their secondary. The first provides the drive for most of their adventures; the second provides purpose for the overall campaign.

Constructing *Zero* Adventures

Preparing an adventure for *Zero* is basically a three-step process. The steps are discussed in detail below, but for the moment, let's just take an overview.

- The first step is to choose a basic motivation or two for the heroes to get involved, and to think of some way for them to act upon that motivation. Often, the motivation will be some sort of trouble for them to deal with—maybe a threat to their survival, or perhaps a mystery to be investigated. In some cases, the heroes may come up with their own ideas for dealing with the situation. But in others, you may have to point them in a particular direction, to get them started.
- The second step is to decide upon some smaller problems to complicate matters for them along the way. Most troubles in life aren't as easy to deal with as they might seem at first. That's why, in any sort of fic-

tion, the heroes find themselves dealing with this, that, and the other thing before finally reaching their main goal.

- The last step is to spice things up with some memorable details, to make the players feel like they are actually there in *Zero's* world. You plan ahead to describe some striking images to draw their imaginations deep into the adventure. The more vivid the world you present to the players, the more real their characters will seem to them, and the more fun everyone will have with the story as it unfolds.

Once your design work is all done, you're ready to drop the player characters into the mix and see what becomes of your creation.

Step One: Motivations for Adventure

It's a basic truth of human nature: A person has to have a reason to pay attention. That's as much the case in an adventure for *Zero* as it is for anything else. In order for the players to get interested in your adventure, then, you have to have some hook to get their characters involved. Choose a powerful motivation, and they will become so wrapped up in the story that they'll lose all track of time until its very end. But choose a weak motivation, and their attention will wander. Worse, they'll compensate for their boredom by cracking jokes and screwing around, making it impossible to keep them focused upon the task at hand. Obviously, then, you want to choose a powerful motivation. Fortunately, *Zero* is rife with strong motivations for adventures. Two of the best are "resolve a danger" and "probe a mystery."

Resolve a Danger: While your players are involved in the game just for the fun of it, that certainly isn't the case for their characters. These rogue bio-mechs are in a continual life-and-death struggle. A character in a normal fantasy or sci-fi game might be

able to abandon the adventuring life and return home. Not so for a *Zero* hero. These characters are in it for the long haul.

One powerful motivation for adventure you can supply for these heroes, then, is to put them in danger that they must resolve. That doesn't have to mean an attack of some sort, although it certainly may. Given the solitude and naivete of these characters, though, there are many other things that you can use to threaten their survival.

They fall into three general groups.

Basic Needs:

Like anyone else, your players' characters need breathable air, drinkable water, edible food, and reasonable temperatures, in order to survive. While they were part of the Equanimity, all of these needs were provided for them. Now that they're no longer part of Zero's fold, they have to supply those things on their own.

One great motivator for adventures, then, is to threaten one or more of these basic needs, forcing the heroes to resolve that threat. Endanger their survival in this way, and they will be up and moving before you know it. Exactly how you go about threatening a basic need depends upon how the heroes are getting by at the moment.

For example, early in the campaign, the player characters are liable to be hiding out in abandoned tunnels on the very outskirts of the occupied hive. Because they are so close to the occupied areas, air and temperature are bearable here. For water, they may have tapped into the hive's supply, perhaps diverting a minor water line from its original destination. When hungry, they can sneak back into occupied areas to steal what food they need.

Now imagine that you, as game master, decide that the hive has discovered their presence and takes action to cut them off. There are many ways in which this could be done, depending upon what sort of trouble you want to give the heroes. Simplest, perhaps, is for the hive to post more soldiers to the locale, and begin sending patrols out looking for the player characters. Or maybe the hive decides to reroute its water lines to deprive the player characters of their access. To drive them out, it could even begin pumping the hot, noxious exhaust fumes from some nearby manufacturing site into the tunnels the heroes have been

occupying of late. Any of these things puts the heroes' life in jeopardy and gives these characters a motivation for taking action. They have to solve the problem if they want to survive.

There are two basic ways of dealing with this sort of danger. Either the heroes can meet it head on, or they can pack up and move to avoid it. When you're devising your adventure, you may want to prepare for both possibilities. In that case, you'll want to have two

adventures ready: one for if they tackle the problem head on; another for if they decide to pack up and move. Or instead, you could take a firmer hand and point the heroes one way or the other, and prepare your adventure for that direction alone.

One great motivator for adventures, then, is to threaten one or more of these basic needs, forcing the heroes to resolve that threat. Endanger their survival in this way, and they will be up and moving before you know it.

It all depends upon how you treat the danger.

If you make the danger overpoweringly threatening, the player characters have little choice but to leave and seek a safer place to stay. Say, for instance, that the hive is reinforcing the area with soldiers, and the heroes discover that they are hopelessly outgunned or outnumbered by these new troops. In that case, the player characters are pretty well certain to move on. As a result, they begin an adventure of exploration for a new safe haven.

On the other hand, if you want to have the heroes face the problem head on, early in the adventure you should let them discover that there is a particular action they can take to solve things. In the case of the exhaust vent, for instance, you might let the player characters learn that the manufacturing site could be shut down permanently if they explode its on-site power source. As a result, they begin an adventure of infiltration and destruction.

Threatening the player characters' basic needs can be the main motivator for adventures in your campaign, the one you fall back upon most frequently. This is especially true once the hive becomes aware of the heroes' existence. It only makes sense that the hive will try repeatedly to rid itself of these rogues, just as any other civilization seeks to eradicate its pests and vermin.

Special Needs: Food, water, air, and temperature may be the most immediate needs of rogue biomechs, but they certainly aren't the only ones. If the heroes are going to be involved in any combat—and of course

they are—then they may find themselves needing to restock ammunition, medical supplies, and replacement parts for repairs. Rather than having the players keep precise lists of ammunition, medicine, and food carried and used, though, this game prefers to keep things moving quickly and focus on story. (After all, how many novels make a point of counting exactly how many shots have been fired, and when the hero has to reload.) This means that in nearly every case it is up to the game master to decide when the player characters are running low on such supplies, based upon how rapidly they have been using them, and how the drama of the campaign is best served. In other words, the heroes need to restock when the game master says they need to restock. In most cases, they won't be able to manufacture such supplies themselves, so they will have to raid the hive or search out an abandoned stockpile. And, of course, those raids and searches can form the basis of adventures.

For that matter, a group may decide that it needs to add a particular caste member to its circle. A group without a breeder, for instance, has a reduced chance of survival in the long run. In order to gain a new member, the group may have to “rescue” someone from the hive, which is certainly the beginning of an adventure. (This can be a great way to introduce new player characters, by having them be the subject of such a rescue. Maybe the new hero has lapsed from the hive, and the old heroes telepathically pick up on the character's situation. Or maybe they just need to kidnap someone and hope that they can break his or her connection with the Equanimity. Either way, the mission can make for a great source of adventure.)

Then again, the heroes may just need to gain some specialized sort of information, something that they will have to invade the hive to obtain. For example, imagine that the group needs a key code for shutting down an old reactor, so that they can pass through it without being fried by radiation. Perhaps their archivist vaguely remembers having run across that code while still within the Equanimity, and knows that it is stored in a particular computer bank still within hive territory. Or you could as easily decide that the computer bank was abandoned by the hive for some unknown reason. Now the heroes have to rediscover that site, and deal with whatever it was that lead the hive to forsake it. That is the basis for a mission to get the missing data. In either case, you have the premise for an adventure ready and waiting.

External Threats: A more straightforward motivator for an adventure is to have the heroes threatened directly. This can be a really exciting way to start the action off, with something attacking the heroes while

they rest. And although it isn't as subtle as playing up some need, the direct-attack option can come from many different types of sources.

Queen Zero might send a team of special soldiers to assassinate the heroes, for instance. This is much worse than simply increasing the number of soldiers in the area and running patrols to search for the rogues. Those threats can be avoided by the heroes packing up and moving to a different locale. But a team that has been ordered specifically to hunt down the rogues and exterminate them is a different problem altogether. It means that the player characters must stay on the move until the threat has been dealt with. They cannot afford to rest, and they may not have time to adequately scout the regions they are fleeing through. That's especially true if the pursuers are expert enough to cut them off from known routes to safety. In order to end this threat, the heroes will pretty much have to find some way to destroy their pursuers. If the threat is too tough to face directly, they may have to lure it into a trap, maybe using a hazardous location that they already know about, but their pursuers do not.

But the hive society isn't the only possible source of deadly attackers. The abandoned regions around it have enough threats of their own to keep the player characters busy. The heroes can run afoul of a whole miscellany of nasty beasties, from natural, to cybernetic, to purely mechanical, each with its own reason for being there. (See the creature descriptions in chapter eight for details of these various beings.)

Whether the heroes invade the territory of one of these types of creatures, or it invades theirs, either way a struggle for survival results, which can form the basis for an adventure. Again, you should have some sort of idea in mind for how the player characters can deal with this threat, for in case they do not immediately come up with a plan of their own.

Imagine, for example, that a pack of gigantic albino crabs migrates through the tunnels the player characters have been frequenting of late. Maybe the first clue the heroes receive of their arrival is strange scuttling noises in the darkness. Perhaps the next is that the characters return from a foraging trip to find their food stores all eaten, the containers ripped to shreds. After building the tension with a few of these near misses, you then face the group with a wave of the crabs themselves, having them pour out of a nearby tunnel, tumbling madly over one another in their desire to consume the heroes alive. Let the characters discover that individually, the crabs are fairly easy to kill, but there are just too many to fight. The only sane choice is to retreat for now and come up with some plan for dealing with the threat.

Make sure to provide the characters with an escape route, and give them a little time to discuss ideas of what they might do. Maybe in their earlier adventures, the heroes discovered a crevasse with a river of lava running along its depths. Perhaps they can use it as a trap, if they can lure the crabs into it. Or one of the group's soldiers might know of a poison spray that the hive used once before to destroy a similar threat. The heroes might decide to "liberate" some of that substance from the hive, or maybe even concoct some of their own. (In order for this to work as a goal to drive the adventure, though, you should make them acquire at least one piece of equipment or one ingredient that they don't already have, before the poison can be created.)

Now, the players don't just invent these ideas for solutions from out of nothing. Rather, they are based upon one of two things: prior experiences or game master information. The longer a campaign continues, the more background the heroes accumulate to draw upon, the more experienced the players become at conceiving of such schemes, and the more practiced the game master becomes at adapting his or her adventure plans to those actions. Early in the campaign, however, the game master will have to be prepared with an idea or two that the heroes can pursue to solve the problem they have been handed. Remember, the point is to give the heroes a motivation for pursuing the current adventure.

Probe a Mystery: Curiosity, they say, killed the cat. But if curiosity weren't such a strong drive for people, we wouldn't need that warning. Characters in fiction are even more prone to follow their curiosity than most people are in real life, which explains why they lead such adventurous lives—however short those lives may be.

Zero being a game of discovery, the sorts of mysteries that drive adventures in the game are usually about some sort of exploration. For example, during their wanderings through old, abandoned tunnels, maybe the player characters come across an immense locked door. They can hardly help but wonder what lies on the other side, which gives them a motivation for discovering some way to open it. As a result, you have the basis of an adventure on your hands. Or per-

haps they have stumbled upon an ancient cavern that obviously once served as an important shrine, its walls adorned with all sorts of electronic gadgetry, an immense altar standing in the center of the floor, and a grand throne overlooking that platform. Can they help but explore the site, poking into its dark corners, trying to activate its machinery? Almost certainly not. Or for that matter, even a mysterious artifact can serve as the

basis for an adventure. If the heroes find one during their explorations, they will naturally be inspired to test it out and do whatever research is necessary to learn what the thing is for and how to use it. Or maybe instead of finding an artifact, the group discovers evidence of a strange race of beings dwelling out

here among the corridors that *Zero* has abandoned. The creatures might prove to be enemies or friends; either way, the heroes have reason to find out more about them.

Earlier, we mentioned that threats to the heroes' basic needs can serve as the motivator you fall back upon most often for adventure ideas, sort of the "meat and potatoes" of your campaign. That being the case, a mystery motivation can be the "exotic dish" that you toss onto the menu from time to time as a bit of variety. Used sparingly, this motivator can add a lot of excitement to the campaign.

Providing Direction: Where there is a problem, there must be a solution. An adventure can be characterized as the journey from the one to the other. It isn't enough, then, to simply dump a problem in the heroes' laps. You must also ensure that they have some direction for pursuing a solution. Doing so in a satisfying manner can be just a little bit tricky.

On the one hand, in order to be prepared for this "journey," the game master needs to plan for encounters and sights the heroes will come across along their way. That's easiest when the game master knows ahead of time what solution they will be pursuing. In the example of the blind, albino crabs, above, the heroes would likely have a different sort of encounters if they planned to lure the things into the lava river than if they decided to raid *Zero*'s hive for a special pesticide. One course takes them through unoccupied tunnels, while the other takes them into the heart of the hive. For that reason, the game master might prepare the adventure with a specific solution in mind, and plan events for that course of action alone.

Characters in fiction are even more prone to follow their curiosity than most people are in real life, which explains why they lead such adventurous lives—however short those lives may be.

On the other hand, players can become dissatisfied if they begin to feel that their heroes have no choice in the matter. Sometimes, they will come up with a plan completely different from anything the game master might have thought of, and will want to pursue that course of action, rather than the solution the game master has suggested. If the game master insists that they follow the prepared plan instead, it can hinder the players' sense of involvement in the campaign.

Avoiding this trouble takes a bit of practice and a little finesse.

Early in the campaign, while everyone is still new to the game, the game master can get by more easily with delivering the heroes a problem and a single direction for solving it. Don't give them time to debate how they might solve the problem, just dump them into the middle of it, and then present the plan. In the crab example, for instance, if the adventure begins with the heroes being attacked by the swarm and narrowly escaping, the game master can simply tell one of the soldier players, "You remember the hive having fought these things before, and they used a special pesticide, which you remember having helped store away." Because the heroes are busy, they are likely to seize upon that plan and run with it. Starting *in medias res* ("in the middle of things") covers a multitude of sins, as action movies often demonstrate. Further, because the heroes themselves are so new to the idea of free will, and so ignorant about their surroundings, the game master can get by with more direct guidance over their actions early in the campaign.

As the players gain experience, though, they will be more likely to want to come up with plans of their own. Fortunately, the game master will have had time to gain experience as well. Sometimes, he or she will be able to predict what direction the heroes will likely take. This is especially true if the game master has taken the opportunity to plant possible solutions in earlier adventures. Given the crab situation, for instance, the heroes are more likely to come up with a plan to toast the things in lava if they came across a lava river in last week's adventure. A sly game master can prepare such possibilities without the players suspecting that they have been manipulated at all. Also, with experience, the game master will feel more comfortable with inventing events "on the fly," so that even if the heroes take an unexpected course of action, he or she doesn't need to twist the players' arms to get things back on track. The prepared course of events can be adapted as necessary during play, to make it fit the heroes' plan, or it could even be abandoned altogether (maybe to be used later, during yet another adventure).

Most campaigns use a mixture of the two approaches. The game master comes prepared to point the heroes in the right direction, if they fail to come up with a good plan, but he or she is ready to abandon the preplanned direction if the heroes get excited about some scheme of their own.

Step Two: Problems Along the Way

The second step in creating an adventure for *Zero* is to decide just what problems the heroes are going to come across along their way to resolving their motivation. Every journey has its notable events; that's what makes it a journey. In *Zero*, these secondary problems make up the flesh of an adventure. While the climax should be the most exciting point, most of the heroes' time is actually spent dealing with the little events along the way.

As the game master, once you know where an adventure will start and end (the problem and resolution of the motivation step, above), you can then set about inventing smaller problems and events to take place along the route from the one to the other. How the heroes deal with those little problems will have a big effect on whether they succeed at their larger goal.

Let's imagine, for example, that on an earlier adventure, the player characters found a strange machine at an abandoned site. Now, as a new adventure, they want to steal a portable electrical generator from the hive, and use it to power up their find. Most of this adventure will involve infiltrating the hive and taking a generator, then. Along the way, they will have to deal with several secondary problems. You might decide that they must cope with the following problems:

- Sneaking into the hive: They need to either find some unsecured access (a ventilator shaft, perhaps), or get through a secured one (overpowering a guard at an outer tunnel, for instance).
- Gaining access to the power station: You could decide that there are electronically locked doors to the facility. The heroes will have to either overcome those locks or fool the staff inside into opening a door.
- Disabling the staff: If they attack the biomechs inside the facility, the Equanimity will be instantly aware of their presence. Perhaps the heroes can overcome them psionically, breaking or obscuring their link to the Equanimity to buy some extra time.
- Disconnecting the generator: Normally, this would not be any problem for a tech of reasonable skill with electronics. But knowing

that the hive is sending soldiers to investigate the loss of contact with the facility staff puts time pressure on the task. You might even decide to have this particular generator wired in an unusual manner, just to increase the tension.

- Escaping from the hive: With the Equanimity alerted to their presence, the heroes are likely to have to battle their way back out of the hive. This would make a good climax to the adventure. Once they have escaped, the player characters have pretty much achieved their goal.

You might notice from the descriptions above that each of these events is a problem-and-solution pair-up just like the main motivation of the adventure. As with that main motivation, you may have to provide the player characters with suggestions for solving some of these problems, but you should let them come up with plans of their own as much as possible. Fortunately, because these events are of more limited scope, they will be easier for even inexperienced players to imagine solutions, and easier for you to adapt on the fly.

In any adventure, there are limitless possibilities for problems you can devise. You'll want to include enough to keep the players occupied for a reasonable period of time, but not so many or so tough that they become discouraged of ever reaching their main goal. For most adventures, five events is about right, maybe fewer if they are particularly tough or time consuming, more if they are quick and easy.

There are all sorts of things to serve as problems along the way to an adventure's resolution. For the sake of inventiveness, it may be help to classify these secondary problems into four groups: Major Beings, Minor Beings, Natural Hazards, and Unnatural Hazards. Let's consider each one separately for a moment.

Major Beings: If the adventure itself deals with a central figure or creature, many of the events leading to a resolution will probably involve that being. Examples might include special agents from Zero herself, mutant cave bears, an ancient cyborg warrior, a psionic being that possesses its victims, or other such villains. See chapter eight for more ideas.

Minor Beings: From rat swarms, to blood-sucking gnats, to acidic slimes, to the soldier guarding the door to the hydroponics garden, these sorts of creatures are more a nuisance than a long-term threat. Most appear once during an adventure, as a temporary problem to be overcome. See chapter eight for more examples.

Natural Hazards: Faced with a choice between mixing it up with Zero's cyberkillers and scaling a hundred-meter cliff to escape, most player characters would choose to do some rock climbing. Sheer cliffs, fields of ice, pitch-dark chasms, avalanches, windy precipices, boiling geysers, flooded tunnels, cave ins, and rivers of lava are just a few of the things that fall into this category. Normally, sensible people would just avoid these sorts of hazards, but sometimes they have no choice.

As a significant note, these sorts of non-living threats carry much more drama in an adventure when the heroes are forced to confront them because of a living enemy (as in the example above). No one enjoys being buried in a random avalanche, but if a villain causes that avalanche, the heroes have someone to blame.

Unnatural Hazards: Not every non-living hazard is natural. The hand of Zero, and of her ancient enemies, show their marks in many different places even among the abandoned reaches of the hive. There are caverns festooned with dangling and broken power lines still crackling with electricity, irradiated regions where radioactive wastes are stored or ancient devices malfunctioned, stretches of isolated tunnel filled with hazardous gases or standing pools of acid, invisible laser grids that once guarded important locales, and even explosive mines and other traps planted at the sites of long-forgotten wars. Any one of these can serve as a significant hurdle for the player characters to cross on their way to concluding an adventure. Some of these things the heroes might not even be aware of until they are well into the danger zone. The game master is encouraged to be devious in revealing these hazards, but be careful not to cause too much harm with them. Remember that they are, after all, intended only as secondary problems for an adventure.

Step Three: Memorable Details

So far, we have talked about the mechanical aspects of putting together an adventure: the character motivation and secondary events. Those are things that the game master needs in order to be prepared for running an adventure, just as players need their characters' statistics in order to determine their capabilities. But a character is more than just a set of attributes; it is also an image and a personality. By the same token, an adventure is more than just a set of events and statistics; it is also a series of images, sensations, and even concepts.

It's time, then, to put the icing on the cake. It's time to dress up your adventure with settings full of sights, sounds, and other sensations, and to plant significant themes to make the adventure unforgettable. (Keep in mind, too, that while motivation is the normal starting point for constructing an adventure, sometimes you can design a story around a memorable detail instead. Maybe something in one of this book's illustrations strikes you, and you wish to explore it further, or perhaps you've conceived of some spectacular place you'd like to describe. Either is fine. You can start with that detail and flesh it out with a suitable motivation and secondary problems.) For the purpose of building *Zero* adventures, memorable details can be divided into two main categories: settings and concepts.

Settings: Stories aren't only about characters and plot, they are also about places. A battle on a bitterly cold Arctic ice field and a battle in a steamy jungle full of raucous birds and monkeys might both happen the same way for all practical purposes. But they will certainly be remembered differently because of their dissimilar locales.

The underground anthill world of *Zero* is an unusual setting in its own right, and the game master can get a lot of mileage out of simply pausing during an adventure to carefully describe a tunnel, cavern, chamber, or corridor where a particular part of the action is taking place. But there are also lots of possibilities for even more exotic scenes. Most of the time, the player characters will be trudging along the rough tunnels of the hive complex, or making their way through complex tangles of pipes and ductwork that serve the machinery of the hive. But just about anything you might imagine can be found somewhere in this underground world. We have already mentioned precipices, dark chasms, and rivers of lava, to name a few. There are also ice-filled tunnels, caverns of crystal, ancient tombs, automatic walkways and tube trains and elevators (some still functional, others not), subterranean lakes, canyons heaped with dead bones, jungles of phosphorescent fungi, even crevasses with a narrow crack of blue sky miles above. Where are all these things? Wherever you want and need them to be. Let the heroes wander far enough, and they will discover all of this, and more.

After you have your adventure plotted out, then, take a moment to invent details of the setting for each encounter along the way. What do the heroes see there? What do they hear? What are the smells at the location? What does the air there feel like to the skin? How much psionic energy can the heroes sense flowing in this location? Settings appeal to the various senses, which is why they add an impression of reality to otherwise straightforward events.

In describing a setting, you should also be careful to convey the general layout of the things, so that the players can base their heroes' actions on that information. For example, if the heroes enter a chamber, and it is filled with row upon row of storage cabinets, they are liable to enter cautiously, checking for danger between each row as they go. If they are suddenly attacked, they know that they can duck between the rows for cover. Sometimes, you will be able to rely upon verbal description alone to get across the layout, especially if the location is fairly simple. At other times, it may help to draw a map for the players, showing the relative position of things, especially if the setting is fairly complex, and if combat is likely to take place here. One good way of handling this is to begin with a verbal description, then reveal a map when battle starts.

Concepts: The other category of memorable detail doesn't have so much to do with the senses as with striking or unusual ideas. During their first adventure, for instance, the player characters discover the feeling of individuality after they lapse from the Equanimity. You should take some time during play to dwell on that concept, make certain that the players perceive it, and let them role-play with it. Later, the heroes may discover the concept of oral speech, instead of telepathy, which is certainly an unusual idea for players. Eventually, they may rediscover biological sex, now that they are cut off from the Equanimity's laboratory reproduction on the one hand and telergic emotional stimulation on the other. Other concepts that are likely to strike the heroes as new are friendship, cooperation, and leadership, as well as vengefulness, worry, jealousy, and loneliness.

It has been said that fiction provides us with an arena to explore actions and feelings that we might not want to risk in the real world. A good portion of the fun of role-playing in this unusual setting, then, is in reexamining such concepts through the perspective of the player characters. The situations you invent, as game master, and the way your players react to them, will dictate exactly what sorts of themes arise during your campaign. But by giving time during the game to play up such concepts, you will make your campaign all the more memorable.

Maintaining a *Zero* Campaign

There are a few different ways to approach the issue of a role-playing campaign. Which one you choose will depend upon just what you and your players desire. The situation is something like creating a television series. At its simplest, a TV series is just a set of unconnected adventures starring the

same group of heroes. But some series go a bit farther than that, to link events from episode to episode, giving the show a bit more cohesiveness. This can also allow for the unfolding of longer plots in the background. Then there are soap operas, which pretty much carry on an hour-by-hour examination of the lives of their characters, picking up the next day where they left off on the previous one.

Zero can handle any of these campaign set-ups. If you want to approach the game as just a series of stand-alone adventures, you can. Or you might decide to string several adventures together with a grand plot behind them all. It can be a great deal of fun if your players begin to realize that what seemed at first to be an unconnected series of threats are actually all the work of one major villain, who they now have to deal with more directly. And, of course, there is the grand story arc explained in chapter four, which leads the heroes from their inception in this book, through the events and settings of its three supplements, to a final resolution. Which approach you take is entirely up to you, and the desires of your players.

Most important to the continuance of any campaign, however, is that the heroes become memorable individuals in the minds of their players. Although they began life as little more than cogs in the machinery of the Equanimity, and start play as reluctant rebels, as the campaign progresses they should develop into distinctive individual personalities. That sort of character development is what stories are really all about.

Managing the Game

You now know just about everything you need to be a *Zero* game master. All that's left to discuss is a few nuts-and-bolts details, short-cuts, and tricks of the trade to make your job easier and finish things out.

Designing Game-Master Characters

The creatures list later in this chapter contains basic information for many different types of beings that your players' heroes can encounter. But you will most likely want to create some of your own, especially as the campaign proceeds. One way to do this is to base your new creature on something from that list, and just replace the description and modify a few of the statistics.

There are two general guidelines to follow when doing this. First, keep in mind that creatures with

lower focus numbers tend to be more deadly with their chosen actions than are creatures with higher focus numbers. If you want to give your heroes a break, then, toss beings their way who have lots of extraneous abilities, and consequently high focus numbers. But when you want to make the heroes really sweat, though, have them stalked by some single-minded creature with only a couple of abilities, and consequently a low focus number. Second, you can vary the number of life points for a creature, to make it easier or tougher to defeat. Creatures with five life points or so will be taken down fairly quickly, while a being with twenty will last a good, long while.

By mixing these two concepts, you can come up with anything from a fragile nuisance (high focus and low life), to a one-shot killer (low focus and low life), to a tenacious bumbler (high focus and high life), to an absolute terror (low focus and high life). Throw in a special feature of some type (protective coloration, for instance, or natural body armor), and a specialized attack (poisonous bite, perhaps, or maybe strangulation), and that wide range becomes nearly infinite.

Managing Game-Master Characters

While players each run only one character apiece, the game master must sometimes keep track of several characters at once. At first, this might seem to be a daunting task. But actually, managing multiple characters is not that difficult. It's just a matter of keeping track of abilities and damage, on the one hand, and making group dice rolls, on the other.

The Character Roster Sheet: You should create a roster sheet where you can record each character's focus number, abilities, and any special capabilities and equipment. As one of those characters takes damage during an encounter, simply mark the damage on that sheet. If you like, you can even use this sheet to jot down what action each character intends to do each round of combat. A simple "move," or "shoot breeder," etc., will do the trick of reminding you of the character's plans.

Action Rolls for Game-Master Characters:

When rolling dice for large groups, there is no need to roll them separately for each character. Instead, pick up all the dice together—two for each character—and roll the handful all at once. Then, beginning with the highest single dice roll and working downward, assign one die to each character. Once each character has a die, begin again with the highest remaining die roll and assign a second die to each character.

For example, if rolling for five characters, after deciding those characters' planned actions, you would pick up ten dice (two per character) and roll them all

at once. Let's imagine that the results are 4, 5, 5, 4, 2, 3, 3, 6, 4, and 5. First, you would line up the five highest dice in descending order:

6, 5, 5, 5, 4.

Then you would line the remaining five dice behind them in descending order:

4, 4, 3, 3, 2.

The results of those pairings become:

24, 20, 15, 15, 8.

As you work through the combat turn sequence, one of your five game-master characters will act at 24, the next at 20, followed by two at 15, and the last at 8.

One special power of being the game master is that you can assign those dice rolls as you see fit, *after you roll them*. If, for example, one of your characters plans to shoot out the lights in the room, and you want that to happen early in the turn, just assign the result of 24 to that character (assuming he or she has shooting as a focus ability, and will succeed in the action given that number). This flexibility makes up for the fact that you will be unlikely to get a 36 or a 2 when rolling all the dice together this way.

When Zero Takes a Hand: Sometimes, Queen Zero herself oversees the action psionically and lends a telepathic hand to her servants. From her psychic vantage point, she may whisper some critical command to be carried out by one biomech, or lend some expertise that another of the characters normally does not possess, or even just encourage an individual to achieve more than he or she thought possible. Biomechs go to great extremes to please their Queen when they know that she is watching.

When Zero lends a hand in an encounter, add two extra dice to the group and roll them along with all the others. Then, *before pairing the dice results*, choose any two dice for Zero's action. The queen can lend these two dice to any one of the characters under her command, helping that biomech to succeed at his or her action this turn. Then, after you pair the rest of the dice results, just pitch out any match-up you wish, to represent what that biomech's effort would have been before receiving Queen Zero's help.

Introducing New Heroes

On occasion, you may have a new player join your game, in which case you will need to introduce a new player character to the current group of heroes. It may even be the case that a player character dies during the course of an adventure, and has to be replaced. There are a couple of ways to go about adding this new hero in.

The simplest (but least exciting) way is to just have the current group stumble across this new character at some point early during their present adventure. The new hero explains that he or she has just lapsed from the Equanimity, and barely escaped the hive alive. This approach works especially well if the new player is not yet familiar with the premise of *Zero*. That person should pick up enough information during character creation to muddle through things, and can learn anything else from the rest of the group as a natural result of tagging along with them.

A more laborious manner of introducing a new character is to design an adventure specifically around that individual. Perhaps the group lacks a breeder, and has been making do with a poorly equipped drone instead. Now they sense the troubled mind of a breeder about to lapse from the Equanimity, and they decide to run a rescue mission to liberate that individual. One strength of this approach is that it encourages a strong bond between the new character and the rescuers.

Finally, you may decide upon a more confrontational introduction. If, for instance, the new character is a soldier, you might declare that he or she has been stationed as guard at some position the heroes need to pass in order to accomplish their current mission. When they meet, the new character battles the rogues at first, but the fight serves as a catalyst for this soldier to lapse. If you decide upon this approach, take care. It bears a couple of potential problems. For one thing, because it pits the new character against the others, this can cause antagonism that may last beyond the introduction itself. For another, it may lead your player characters to think that perhaps they can encourage other biomechs to abandon the hive mind. Ultimately, that line of thought is destructive to the campaign. *Zero* is essentially about individualism in the face of a vast, conformist society. Let the rogues foster more rebels, and all too soon the central tension is leached from the game.

Hazards

Weapons aren't the only things that cause damage. A biomech can fall, suffocate, be crushed by an avalanche, be burned, or suffer radiation damage, among other things. Here are some quick and simple damage ratings for these sorts of hazards.

Falling: It isn't the fall that hurts, of course; it's the sudden stop at the end. That impact has a damage rating of 1 per meter fallen. A successful agility roll reduces the damage by 1 per level of success, and body armor gives its normal protection against the wounds that result, *but does not reduce the stun*.

For example, imagine a character with 2 points of body armor falls 10 meters, but gains 2 levels of success at an agility roll upon landing. The character would suffer a damage rating of 10, reduced to 8 by the agility roll, and the body armor would reduce the resulting wounds to 6, for a final result of 8 stuns and 6 wounds.

Fire: Small flames (as from a candle, for instance) might have a damage rating of 1 stun (no wounds), due to the pain they can cause. Stronger flames often destroy the nerves so quickly that the character feels little pain, but suffers serious damage. These have a damage rating of 1 wound (no stun) or higher, depending upon their size. A blazing torch might have a rating of 1 wound, for instance, while a good-sized bonfire might have a rating of 3 wounds. This damage continues for as long as the character is subjected to the flame, so a character covered with burning oil might suffer 1 wound each turn for several turns (as determined by the game master).

Radiation: The trouble with radiation is that the victim may not notice the damage until after it has already occurred, because it can burn tissue inside the body before showing any outward symptoms. The game master should keep the damage rating relatively low, then, and give the player characters ample clues to its presence (dead creatures lying about, or perhaps even a telesthesia, telegnosis, or telepathy roll—the latter representing some low level awareness of the body's condition by means of the autonomic nervous system).

As with strong flame, radiation does wound damage only, no stun. Normally, a rating of 1 point is sufficient, 2 at most, unless you have some reason for wanting to kill off all of your player characters in one fell swoop.

Drowning and Suffocation: Characters denied oxygen, whether through drowning or some other form of suffocation, suffer no damage for three minutes if remaining still and holding their breath, one minute if active, as in combat. After that time, they suffer 1 point of stun every ten seconds until unconscious, then 1 point of wound every thirty seconds until brain dead (roughly five minutes). After that time, they cannot be revived.

Poison: Poisons don't deliver all of their damage at one blow, the way that a normal attack does.

Consequently, in *Zero* they are handled in the following manner. The damage rating is how many points of stun damage the poison causes on the combat turn following its delivery. On each subsequent round, this damage rating is halved (rounding up), and continues to do stun damage until the victim falls unconscious. From that point on, the damage rating is halved each round and causes wounds until its rating is brought to one point. The round after that, it ceases to do further damage.

Imagine, for instance, that a completely healthy character is hit with a dart containing poison with a damage rating of 7. The dart itself is too small to actually cause any damage on the turn it hits. But on the next turn, the victim suffers 7 points of stun damage. The turn thereafter, the damage rating falls to 4 (half of 7, rounded up), so the victim takes his remaining 3 points of stun and falls unconscious. (The excess point of stun is simply ignored.) On the following turn, the damage rating falls to 2, both wounds. And the next turn it falls to 1, a final wound. The turn thereafter, it ceases to do damage. The victim has suffered a total of 10 points of stun and 3 wounds.

Introducing New Abilities

Within the Equanimity, biomechs lead fairly sheltered lives. They learn only what is necessary for the continuance of the hive society. But rogues find themselves facing a variety of new challenges they could not have imagined previously. As a result, they have the opportunity to learn new skills that they could not have imagined. That is the reason for the blank lines of the abilities column on the character sheet.

Many of the creatures in chapter eight are listed with special abilities that the heroes may learn by observation, and some of the equipment in chapter five requires special abilities, as well. Also, the supplementary books of this game provide many new abilities for the characters to learn, based upon the areas dealt with in those sources.

As the game master, you may even wish to define some new abilities on your own, to suit your campaign as it develops. As a guideline, however, first consider whether the ability you are considering falls under a currently defined one. If there is nothing suitable in the current list, then your planned ability is justified.

CHAPTER 08: GAME-MASTER CREATURES

This chapter describes many different creatures—both within the hive and without—with which the player characters may have to deal in their adventures. In doing so, it also provides more information about the world in which these heroes live, and it reveals more secrets about the person of Zero herself, and the organization of her hive overall.

Biomechs

There are roughly half a million souls dwelling within the Equanimity, under the dominion of Queen Zero. Among those biomechs, caste divisions and ranking are immediately obvious upon observation, by both eye and mind. The players know, of course, that as biomechs with four-digit names, their characters rank near “lowest on the totem pole” (though not at the very bottom). The material which follows provides the game master with the necessary information for portraying biomechs of other ranks as well. We begin at the top of the heap, with Queen Zero herself.

Zero

Most of the time, if the player characters encounter Queen Zero, she is not in the flesh, but is rather a mental presence directing the efforts of other hive members. In some cases, that mental presence may even reach out to touch the heroes’ minds. But only in the most unusual of circumstances—such as at the very end of the campaign story arc—are the player characters likely to meet her in the flesh.

Normally, then, the game master need not worry about the abilities of Zero herself. For scenes in which she is merely a mental presence, there is no reason to keep track of her life points, because she is not physically present to take damage. Nor is there reason to list her abilities, because she draws upon

those of her hive members. And there is no reason to worry about her focus rating, because the focus ratings of her servants present are used instead. The main function Zero serves in such scenes is to allow the game master a couple of extra dice for the hive members’ actions. (See “When Zero Takes a Hand” on page 55.) Other than that, she simply provides a rationale for the hive members to operate as efficiently as could be imagined.

If and when the player characters ever do meet Queen Zero physically, the purpose of the scene should be for role-playing rather than combat. As can be seen from the information below, Zero is a deadly opponent in her own right. What’s more, she is always attended by a handful of aides and a pair of cyberkillers (see below), any of whom would sacrifice their own lives in order to save hers, not to mention the scores of other hive members waiting always nearby, at her beck and call. Considering all of this, if the player characters ever find themselves involved in combat with Zero, their only hope of survival is to flee before they are killed.

Queen Zero’s game statistics are as follow.

Focus: 0.

Sure, this breaks the rules, but because of her unique position as head and center of the hive, Zero is above the law. In effect, Zero never fails at any ability roll; she always gains at least one level of success. On a roll of 10 or higher, she gains two levels. A roll of 20 or better gains her three levels. And she gains four levels on a roll of 30 or better.

Abilities: All.

Zero is able to use any and all of the abilities listed anywhere in this book. Those which she does not possess herself, she is able to access immediately from her closest aides (The Five—see below), or from other, specialized hive members such as the cyberkillers. Even should something happen to these

servants, she can, if necessary, access the abilities of any other member of the Equanimity.

In addition, Zero possesses three special skills with the telepathy ability—*life drain*, *life transfer*, and *erasure*.

Telepathy—Life Drain: Through this ability, Queen Zero can repair physical damage to herself by drawing the life energy from someone else. In effect, any stun or wound damage she suffers is instantly healed, and the target of the life drain power suffers an equivalent amount and type of damage. For each level of success she gains with this ability, Zero can transfer two points of stun damage or one point of wound damage. The target of the power can try to resist with a willpower or telepathy roll, on a level to level basis.

Normally, to avoid this chance of resistance, Zero transfers the damage to some specially assigned hive member who is entirely willing to do so for the Queen. Breeder 1 is usually the biomech chosen for this purpose, because of her built-in healing system (see below).

Telepathy—Life Transfer: If mortally wounded, Queen Zero can transfer her consciousness into another body, and simply take up residence there. She must accumulate five levels of success with the power before coming into full control of the body, but one level is sufficient to guarantee her survival.

This power is what has kept the Queen alive over the many millennia of her existence. As her current body grows old and feeble, or suffers some sort of serious damage, she transfers her consciousness into a healthy young one. For this reason, she always keeps a spare body nearby, ready to be possessed.

Telepathy—Erasure: Zero maintains such control over the Equanimity that she can revise the memories of everyone linked to it, to suit her own purposes. More than one rebellion has been put down this way, with the rebels destroyed and all recollection of their existence erased from the collective mind. In order to fully root out all memory of someone, the Queen must accumulate a full ten successes with the erasure ability.

The Queen can even use this ability against the player characters should they become enough of a nuisance. When any of them are linked to the Equanimity—even merely as eavesdroppers—and Zero becomes aware of their presence, she can use the ability to erase their memories of one another, sowing confusion within the group.

Gear: Besides a few pieces of standard equipment, Zero possesses several items of gear unique to herself.

Psi Helmet: The helmet that Queen Zero wears serves to boost her already powerful psionic abilities to even greater levels. It gives her a bonus modifier of 3 when using psionic abilities, and it automatically reduces by one level the effectiveness of psionic powers used against her. The helmet also projects a continual telekinetic shield, which protects from physical attacks as 5 points of armor, though without causing the Queen any penalty modifiers to her actions.

Electro-Neural Linkages: The Queen's garment includes six extendible arms with electro-neural links, which allow Zero to connect directly to any computer terminal or (by means of microfilament wires) to any living brain.

Disrupter Pistol: Although she would have to be in truly desperate straits to use it, the Queen does possess a hidden pistol of unusual technology, which causes damage by disintegration to its target. The damage rating of this pistol is 4.

Spare Body: See the description of "telepathy—life transfer," above, for an explanation.

The Five

Just below Queen Zero in pecking order are the five key members of the hive's castes: Archivist 1, Breeder 1, Drone 1, Soldier 1, and Technician 1. Collectively, these biomechs are known as "The Five."

The Five are so closely tied to Zero that they seem to be nothing more than extensions of her mind. They seem to have no thoughts of their own, their minds are so absorbed into hers. Not a glimmer of individualism shows among them.

Normally, The Five remain in Zero's physical presence, arranged around the Queen in a circle. Archivist 1 stands directly behind the Queen; Breeder 1 stands just behind her left shoulder; Drone 1 and Soldier 1 stand side by side before her, the drone to her left hand and the soldier to her right; and Technician 1 stands behind her right shoulder. In this way, they form a physical barrier to protect the Queen from any danger.

Focus: 1.

Again, this breaks the rules, but besides being under the direct mental control of Queen Zero, each of The Five is surgically and technologically enhanced to more fully focus upon whatever the job at hand. Because of this, each is considered to have a focus rating of 1, despite being knowledgeable concerning several different abilities.

Abilities: Each member of The Five is most likely to use the abilities listed for his or her caste immediately below. When pressed to use some other ability, the individual must either use it as an unfamiliar ability or access it from one of the other members, or from someone else within the Equanimity.

“Borrowing” a focus ability in this way requires one action to initiate, and causes the biomech to suffer a one-point penalty modifier when using the borrowed ability.

Archivist: Combat psionics, cleverness, willpower, telegnosis, telepathy, teleportation, telesthesia, computers.

Breeder: Brawling, combat psionics, agility, cleverness, telepathy, telergy, telesthesia, medicine.

Drone: Brawling, shooting, agility, strength, willpower, telepathy, computers, electronics, mechanics, piloting.

Soldier: Brawling, throwing, shooting, combat psionics, agility, telegnosis, telekinesis, telepathy, telergy, telesthesia.

Technician: Brawling, combat psionics, agility, cleverness, willpower, telekinesis, telepathy, teleportation.

Gear: Naturally, biomechs this close to the Queen have some special equipment.

Archivist: Besides the normal computer links and memory chips, Archivist 1 also possesses a splitting circuit which allows her brain to perform two separate functions at the same time. As a result, this master archivist can take two actions each combat round, rather than the usual one. They must be different actions, however.

Breeder: Besides a breeder’s usual medical tools and pheromone glands, Breeder 1 also has an excellent internal healing system which automatically works to repair any damage the biomech suffers. In effect, the breeder is able to make a medicine roll once each round, with a 2-point bonus modifier, without treating that healing as an action.

Drone: Drone 1 has a flamer installed in place of one arm (which is certainly something unusual for a drone), and 1-point dermal armor. This flamer is specially designed to jet narrow streams of flame even to shooting range.

Soldier: Soldier 1 is outfitted with twin pulse cannons (with multiple, rotating barrels), 2-point implanted dermal armor, and a specially designed

electromagnetic armor generator array which adds another 2 points of protection without causing any penalty modifier to the biomech’s actions. This electromagnetic armor also works against psionically induced damage.

Technician: Besides the tool sets, artificial sensor eye, and computer linkages common to all technicians, this biomech also has implanted a special computer diagnostic system which gives her a 3-point bonus modifier to all abilities in the “trained” category. The technician can even use the system to solve problems communicated to her telepathically from distant biomechs.

The Forty

Like The Five, above, these biomechs have single-digit names, all of the digits greater than 1 (Archivist 2 through Archivist 9, for example.) The Forty are, in effect, backups for The Five, ready to step in should anything untoward happen to one of Zero’s closest aides. In addition, they serve as assistants to the Five, stationed throughout the hive to be their eyes and ears.

The Forty are not as entwined in the mind of Zero as are The Five, so they have a trifle more individuality. Still, they are close enough to the Queen’s thoughts that they have no real opportunity for rebellion.

Focus, Abilities, and Gear: As for The Five, above.

The Two-Digit Series

Just below The Five and The Forty in status are 450 biomechs named with two digits apiece (Breeder 10 through Breeder 99, for example). Members of the two-digit series act as lieutenants for The Forty, operating directly under their oversight.

While not quite as powerful or well equipped as the single-digit biomechs above them, these members of the hive are still much more than a match for most player characters.

Focus: Typically 2 or 3, though some higher.

Abilities: While The Five and The Forty are bio-mechanically enhanced to maintain a wide range of abilities at a low focus rating, members of the two-digit series are run according to the rules. Each of them concentrates pretty much on only two or three abilities, as indicated by their focus rating. Given how many of this series there are, however, there is

some variance among individuals even within the same caste. For any particular individual, the game master should pick abilities from those listed below.

Archivist: Besides telepathy, either cleverness and/or telegnosis, and perhaps willpower or computers.

Breeder: Telepathy, of course, plus telergy and/or medicine, and perhaps cleverness or willpower.

Drone: Telepathy, plus one or two of brawling, strength, quickness, electronics, and mechanics.

Soldier: Telepathy and one combat ability, plus agility or a second combat ability.

Technician: Telepathy, plus one or two of telekinesis, computers, electronics, mechanics, and piloting.

Gear: Equipment for the two-digit series of biomechs is as standard for player characters. See the beginning gear for each of the castes in chapter three.

The Three-Digit Series

There are roughly 4,500 members of the hive with three-digit names (Archivist 100 through Technician 999). If biomechs of the two-digit series are effectively lieutenants, those of the three-digit series serve as something like sergeants of the hive. They are often assigned to oversee teams of lower-ranking biomechs, guiding them in their labor around the hive facilities.

Focus: Typically 4 or 5.

Abilities: As with the two-digit series, these biomechs follow the normal rules of the game, and have a number of abilities equal to their focus rating. But there is considerable variance among them as to exactly which abilities are possessed. For any particular three-digit series biomech the player characters might meet, choose from the following lists.

Archivist: Telepathy, of course, and usually both cleverness and telegnosis, as well as combat psionics, willpower, or some ability from the "Trained" list.

Breeder: Telepathy, plus both telergy and medicine as a rule, and perhaps brawling, cleverness, telesthesia, or willpower.

Drone: Telepathy, plus three or four of brawling, throwing, shooting, strength, quickness, electronics, and mechanics.

Soldier: Telepathy and at least two combat abilities, and often including agility (for dodging attacks).

Technician: Telepathy, plus three or four of telekinesis, teleportation, computers, electronics, mechanics, and piloting.

Gear: See the beginning gear for each of the castes in chapter three.

The Four-Digit Series

This is the rank of the player characters. There are as many as 45,000 biomechs with four-digit names at any one time (Archivist 1000 through Technician 9999).

While members of the five-digit series (below) typically work in groups of half a dozen to a full dozen or more, under the oversight of one or two biomechs with three-digit names (above), those of the four-digit series are often assigned to one- or two-person tasks which require a bit of personal initiative. (This could also explain why no other series is as prone to lapse from the Equanimity as those with four-digit names.)

Focus: Typically 6 or 7. (Player characters may vary from this considerably, of course.)

Abilities: As with biomechs of two- and three-digit names, those of the four-digit series have a number of focus abilities appropriate to their focus rating. For game-master characters of this series, follow the guidelines below.

Archivist: Telepathy, of course, and nearly always both cleverness and telegnosis. In addition, three or four other abilities from combat psionics, willpower, and the "Trained" list.

Breeder: Telepathy, plus both telergy and medicine in nearly every case. Fleshed out with three or four abilities chosen from brawling, cleverness, telesthesia, and/or willpower.

Drone: Telepathy, plus five or six of brawling, throwing, shooting, agility, strength, quickness, electronics, and mechanics.

Soldier: Telepathy and generally each of the four combat abilities, plus agility and either quickness or a second psionic ability (for its combat use).

Technician: Telepathy, telekinesis, and three of the four "Trained" abilities other than medicine. In addition, one or two of the following: brawling, throwing, shooting, agility, and teleportation.

Gear: See the beginning gear for each of the castes in chapter three.

The Five-Digit Series

When the five-digit series is entirely filled, it consists of fully 450,000 biomechs (Archivist 10,000 through Technician 99,999), bringing the population of the hive to roughly half a million. These biomechs are the real workhorses of the hive, laboring in groups of a dozen or so under the watchful eyes of three-digit series supervisors. Typically, the work they perform requires less expertise than that done by members of the four-digit series, which leaves their minds somewhat freer to bask in the depths of the hive mind. Other than The Five, these biomechs are, perhaps, the most contented of all the hive.

Focus: Typically 8 or 9.

Abilities: Each bears eight or nine focus abilities, as appropriate for his or her focus rating. Because they possess so wide a range of focus abilities, there is actually less variance among these biomechs than among those with shorter names.

Archivist: Telepathy, of course, and nearly always both cleverness and telegnosis. In addition, three or four other abilities from combat psionics, willpower, and the "Trained" list.

Breeder: Telepathy, plus both telergy and medicine in nearly every case. Fleshed out with three or four abilities chosen from brawling, cleverness, telesthesia, and/or willpower.

Drone: Telepathy, plus five or six of brawling, throwing, shooting, agility, strength, quickness, electronics, and mechanics.

Soldier: Telepathy and generally each of the four combat abilities, plus agility and either quickness or a second psionic ability (for its combat use).

Technician: Telepathy, telekinesis, and three of the four "Trained" abilities other than medicine. In addition, one or two of the following: brawling, throwing, shooting, agility, and teleportation.

Gear: As listed for beginning player characters.

Other Series

If the game master would prefer to have an even larger hive population, adding a six-digit series to the list increases that population by 4,500,000 souls (Archivist 100,000 through Technician 999,999). Biomechs with six-digit names would work in the same groups as those with five-digit names, holding tools and fetching parts for them while they worked.

Adding a seven-digit range to the hive would increase its population by 45,000,000, which ought to be large enough for any game master, no matter how grand the scale of his or her campaign. These biomechs would do pretty much the same thing as those of the six-digit series, although they would be apt to stand around and watch others work much of the time.

Focus: 10 (both six- and seven-digit series biomechs).

Abilities: Follow the guidelines for the five-digit series, above, but include an extra ability or two.

Gear: As listed for beginning player characters.

The Cyberkillers

Outside of the normal caste system of archivist, breeder, drone, soldier, and technician, Queen Zero keeps a special cadre of bodyguards and assassins she calls the cyberkillers. Distinguishable by their all enclosing, black, psi-lens helmets, the cyberkillers are not mentally interlinked with the rest of the Equanimity, though they can eavesdrop upon it. They maintain their own psionic network, however, answerable only to Zero herself.

Besides being incredible warriors, the cyberkillers are capable of using combat psionics in ways not imagined by normal hive members.

Focus: 6.

Abilities: Brawling, throwing, shooting, combat psionics, agility, and willpower.

All psionic abilities are possessed as prior abilities, but the psi lens causes them to be treated as focus abilities. In addition, with their psionic powers, the cyberkillers are able to use combat functions that are entirely unknown to other hive members. Those functions are as follows:

Combat Telekinesis—Pyrokinesis: This ability allows the user to affect motion on a molecular level, raising the heat of an object. Just how much that heat can be affected depends upon the success level of the ability roll. Living targets can make a willpower or telekinesis roll of their own to reduce the effects on a level per level basis.

At one level of success, the user can ignite any highly flammable substance (oil, for instance) with but a thought. If the ability is applied to a living creature, that victim feels feverish and dizzy, and suffers 1 point of stun per round of combat from the heat.

At two levels of success, the user can ignite moderately flammable substances (cloth or wood, for instance). If applied to a living creature, the target becomes delirious from the heat and suffers 2 points of stun per combat round.

At three levels of success, the user can cause normally inflammable substances like plastics to warp and soften, growing painfully hot to the touch. A living creature targeted by this level of power begins to blister and suffers 1 wound per round, in addition to the stun damage mentioned above.

At four levels of success, the user can cause metal to glow with heat, liquids to vaporize, or living creatures to burst into flame. A living target suffers 2 wounds per round and must pass a willpower roll to avoid panicking and running around senselessly while screaming.

Combat Telepathy—Psi Blast: With this ability, the user can create a telepathic “shout” of powerful thoughts and emotions, causing physical stun damage to the target. The damage rating of this attack is 3 (stun). It can be resisted with a willpower or telepathy roll, on a level by level basis.

Combat Teleportation—Wrack: Using this ability, the cyberkiller can cause a target to teleport in several directions all at once, as if exploding. The damage done by this attack is 3 wounds per level. At lower levels of success, the victim feels a painful jolt and wrenching sensation, followed by slight bleeding. But at four levels of success, the victim literally explodes into pieces, spraying gore every which way.

The target can attempt to resist the power with a willpower or teleportation roll.

Gear: Besides their powerful psionic abilities, the cyberkillers are capable warriors as well. Standard equipment for them is as follows.

Pulse Cannon: Unlike most soldiers of the hive, the cyberkillers do not have these grafted onto their bodies in place of a forearm and hand. Instead, they possess special versions which they carry and fire with both hands.

Chameleon Suit: See chapter three.

Psi Lens: See chapter three.

Targeting Scope: See chapter three. For a cyberkiller, this scope is built into the psi lens helmet and is jacked into the pulse cannon so that it can be fired accurately even “from the hip.”

Other Creatures

Of course, biomechs aren’t the only beings dwelling in the underground world of Zero, as much as the hive might wish it so. There are all sorts of other things slinking and flitting through the tunnels and caverns, preying upon one another, or upon the hive itself. Now that they too dwell outside the hive rather than within it, the player characters are liable to meet many of these things up close and personal.

The creatures below are only examples of what things are possible. We encourage the game master to use these ideas as a springboard for his or her own weird concoctions.

Albino Fox

These fox-like canines aren’t really dangerous—though they might get scared and try to bite someone if cornered. Actually, they are sort of cute, and could even make reasonable pets. But of course, to members of the Equanimity, such a concept is completely alien. Consequently, the creatures are considered nothing but pests.

Albino foxes are pure white, from untold generations of living underground. Over the ages, their eyes have atrophied, till they are little more than slits hidden within the fur of their faces. Their ears have grown more keen as a result, and are now large and rigid enough to seem bat-like. Their snouts have grown longer as well, ending in a quivering pink nose which can distinguish scents fully as well as a modern bloodhound.

The creatures are solitary beasts, but if trained young, they can develop a surprising loyalty to a master.

Stealthy and intrusive little animals, the foxes often infiltrate Zero’s hive in search of food, where they may be able to hide out for quite a period of time before being tracked down and killed.

Focus: 3.

Abilities: Brawling, agility, cleverness (typically used for stealth, but also applicable to opening containers and so on).

Gear: Teeth and claws, damage rating 1 (stun or wound).

Androids

In ages past, before her telepathic control of other minds was perfected, Queen Zero had a band of robotic warriors built to serve as soldiers for the hive—and as a personal guard for herself. Later, when her mental control was more sure, she replaced these androids with the current caste of biomech soldiers, whose minds she could monitor for loyalty. The first task for the new biomech soldiers was to destroy the androids, who they were now to replace.

When the androids learned what their fate was soon to be, they abandoned the hive, fighting their way to freedom. Out among the abandoned reaches of the underground world, they developed a society of their own, based entirely upon logical thought. Over the ages since that time, their numbers have dwindled, due sometimes to natural disaster, but as often to power failure or some other electrical or mechanical problem. Now, only a few dozen remain, who sit and debate among the lifeless bodies of their ancient companions.

These androids have no desire to do battle, but if threatened they will fight with a soulless savagery to survive. Unfortunately, they are likely to be extremely suspicious of the player characters when they first meet, because they suspect them to be scouts for Zero, come to prepare for an invasion to destroy them once and for all.

If the player characters initiate a fight, they are in for a tough time of things. But if they are careful in their approach to these androids, they could make of them a powerful ally.

Focus: 10.

Abilities: Brawling, throwing, shooting, agility, cleverness, strength, quickness, computer, electronics, mechanics. Every one of the androids has exactly these focus abilities. None has any prior abilities, and none can use psionics at all. Other things, such as medicine, they can treat as unfamiliar abilities.

Gear: Each android bears twin blasters (one built into each forearm, to fire through the palm). Their hands and feet do damage as clubs. Their cybernetic bodies are resistant to damage, acting as 2-point body armor, *though without causing any penalty modifier to their actions*. They also are specially wired for combat, giving them a 1-point bonus modifier combat abilities, and for agility when dodging attacks.

Special Notes: Androids ignore any stun damage from attacks. Their cybernetic bodies are too tough to notice any damage other than wounds. Even then, they don't suffer penalty modifiers for wounds they have sustained.

Also, as mentioned above, the androids have no psionic abilities at all. Their cybernetic brains are not capable of psionics. In effect, the androids are "blind" to these abilities, for which reason they find them fascinating in organic creatures.

Carrion Bats

These pernicious vermin serve the purpose of buzzards within the underground world of Zero. They consume the rotting carcasses of dead creatures, or even the not-yet-dead. Carrion bats carry a legion of diseases, as well. The barest scratch of a claw or fang is certain to result in a painful infection at the least, and possibly even a feverish, painful death.

The beasts have a wingspan of one to two meters, and may mass up to fifteen kilos. Although they prefer to wait for dead meat or an easy kill, they are not above attacking even a healthy target when enraged or desperately hungry.

Focus: 3.

Abilities: Brawling, agility, quickness (flying).

Gear: Claw and tooth, damage rating 1 (stun or wound).

Special Notes: Carrion bats have 6 life points each. But they tend to attack in groups of a dozen or more.

Cave Boar

Cave boar are savage, solitary pigs that roam the caverns of the underworld, browsing upon fungi, rats, albino foxes, and the like. Most are roughly knee-high on a biomech, and mass thirty to fifty kilos. But a few reach sizes up to waist-high on a biomech and mass as much as 150 kilos.

These creatures do not have a good disposition. They tend to attack upon sight pretty much anything they encounter.

Focus: 4.

Abilities: Brawling, agility (for dodging), strength, quickness.

Gear: Tusk, damage rating 2. Thick hide acts as 2-point armor which causes only a 1-point penalty modifier to the beast's actions.

Special Notes: Cave boar have 12 life points each.

Dingoes

In places, packs of wild dogs run through the tunnels and caverns of *Zero's* underground realm, hunting for whatever they may find to eat. The individual dingoes are rangy, sparsely fleshed beasts massing perhaps twenty-five kilos and less than a meter in height. But they are energetic hunters, operating in cooperative packs of half a dozen dogs or so. Tracking by scent more than any other sense, they are able to flush out enough prey to maintain their existence. Once they are on the trail, their baying can be heard echoing hauntingly for several kilometers.

Focus: 5

Abilities: Brawling, agility, cleverness (primarily for tracking), quickness, willpower.

Gear: Powerful jaws, damage rating 2 (wound). Pelt acts as 1-point armor, without causing a 1-point penalty modifier to their actions.

Special Notes: Dingoes have 8 life points each.

Dissembler

An ancient enemy of Queen Zero in ages past salted the caverns surrounding the hive with mechanical assassins designed to disguise themselves by animating the bodies of their kills. In their natural state, these "dissemblers" somewhat resemble a metallic horseshoe crab. But most of the time, they prefer to kill an organic being and hide under its skin, resting atop the skull, when possible, and extruding metal filaments from their central bulk to lend movement to the corpse.

While its victim is still fresh, a dissembler can animate the muscles by controlled electrical impulses, lending it a surprisingly realistic mobility. Later, the creature must resort to twining its filaments around the victim's skeletal system itself and tugging it into motion as the muscles rot away.

Two-legged victims are the most difficult to manipulate, of course, given how essential balance is to them. Often, a dissembler in possession of a bio-mech's body will pretend to be injured or delirious to cover for its clumsiness.

Focus: 5.

Abilities: Brawling, throwing, shooting, agility, electronics.

Gear: Electrified metal filaments, mechanical blades, and drills, damage rating 3. Casing acts as 3-

point armor, without causing any penalty modifier to a dissembler's actions.

Special Notes: While in possession of a body, a dissembler can use that victim's combat gear, but suffers a 2-point penalty modifier to all actions taken with that body.

A dissembler has only 5 "life" points.

Giant Albino Crabs

Like enormous army ants, these crabs swarm through subterranean tunnels, consuming anything edible in their path. They don't move very quickly, which means that they can be avoided as long as there are open passages ahead. And individually they are not very dangerous. But the crabs swarm in groups of a hundred or more, forming a living carpet capable of tearing apart even the most ferocious of creatures. Those crabs which perish in the attack are eaten by the others as well.

Each crab is roughly the size of a dinner plate, with jagged pincers as big as a human hand.

Focus: 2.

Abilities: Brawling, strength (for pinching).

Gear: Pincers, damage rating 1 (wound). Carapace acts as 1-point armor, though it does not cause the crab a 1-point penalty modifier to its actions.

Special Notes: Each giant albino crab has only 3 life points.

Giant Rats

These nasty beasts are born survivors, and born carriers of disease. While each is roughly the size of a young child, the creatures can work their way through holes so small and passages so narrow that it seems impossible, to invade the hive and steal food. Sometimes, when especially desperate, a pack of giant rats may set upon some lone bio-mech and drag him or her off to be eaten.

Focus: 4

Abilities: Brawling, agility, quickness, telepathy (receptive only—the creatures can sense telepathic activity nearby but cannot join in).

Gear: Bite, damage rating 2. Wounds inflicted by giant rats almost always become infected. Unless treated with antibiotics to fight the infection, the victim has a difficult time healing his or her wounds,

and may die of them. If they are healed completely within one hour, by use of the medicine ability and antibiotics, the victim is fine. Any wounds remaining after that can be healed only at the normal rate of one point per day.

In addition, each day, the game master must make a damage roll for the infection, treated as a focus ability against a focus number of 10. For each level of success gained on this roll, the victim suffers 1 wound. Antibiotics cause as a penalty modifier to this roll, for each *consecutive* day that the victim receives antibiotics, the game master should apply a 1-point penalty to the roll. (For example, on the first day of antibiotic treatment, the infection suffers a 1-point penalty to its roll; if the treatment is continued the next day, the infection suffers a 2-point penalty to its roll; if no antibiotics are available on the next day, there is no penalty to the roll; and if antibiotics are restored on the fourth day, the penalty returns to 1 point; and so on.)

Special Notes: Giant rats have only 5 life points each, but they are usually encountered in groups of ten or more.

Gremlins

These child-sized, simian creatures have reptilian skins with a natural camouflage ability, like that of salamanders, and an affinity for the magnetic fields that occur spontaneously around electrical circuitry. It isn't so much that they need that magnetic energy as that they enjoy it, like an addictive drug. Consequently, they have a habit of worming their way inside electrical machinery and either rewiring bits of it to enhance those fields, or accidentally electrocuting themselves and shorting out the circuitry with their corpses. In either case, the result is malfunctioning equipment.

Gremlins also have a fascination for mechanical equipment, and like to tinker with its moving parts. Again, as often as not, this results in malfunctions and destruction. It isn't at all unusual for a gremlin to get caught accidentally in the moving parts of a mechanical apparatus and end up dead, while jamming up the works.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the hive hunts these creatures mercilessly, destroying them upon sight. Over the ages, gremlins have come to fear biomechs as a result, though this does not prevent them from continuing to sneak into machinery on the outskirts of the hive.

If the player characters manage to make meaningful contact with gremlins, they may be able to learn bits of information concerning the history of the hive and its environs. Unfortunately, gremlins are not all that bright, are not great conversationalists, and are generally more interested in any gear the rogues are carrying than in talking with those rogues themselves.

Focus: 8.

Abilities: Brawling, throwing, combat psionics, agility, strength, quickness, willpower, telepathy.

Gear: Tooth and claw, damage rating 2.

Special Notes: Gremlins have 8 life points each. They are usually encountered in groups of ten to twenty.

Seekers

The remnants of a forgotten war, seekers are mobile, artificially intelligent, explosive mines the size of a human fist. They home in upon body heat, recognizing the appropriate range for a living person. Once within sight, they move with astonishing quickness, rolling across the ground at up to 50 meters in a single second (100 in a two-second combat round). Upon contact, they explode as a shaped charge, delivering most of their force directly to the body of the victim. Seekers are not designed to vaporize their target entirely; an explosion that powerful could collapse an entire complex of caverns. Rather, they are intended to blow a hole in their victim too large to be patched, or perhaps to blow off a limb. That way, the victim can bleed to death at its leisure, without much damage done to the surrounding area.

Focus: 3.

Abilities: Its three focus abilities have slightly different applications than for a biomech, as explained below.

Throwing: Effectively, a seeker launches itself at its target, which means its attack can be dodged.

Cleverness: It is able to detect body heat at a distance of one range band per level of success rolled for this ability.

Quickness: A seeker can move 20 meters per turn without treating it as an action. Each level of success rolled for a movement action gains the seeker an additional 20 meters of movement.

Gear: Explosive core, damage rating 3. A victim which suffers wounds from this explosion greater than half its normal life points continues to bleed from the attack, suffering an additional 1 wound every minute until dead or healed at least 1 point of wound.

Special Notes: Seekers have only 4 “life points” but are immune to stun damage. They also have a metallic shell which acts as 2-point body armor, without causing the machine any penalty modifiers to its actions. If a seeker suffers at least 4 points of wound damage from a single attack, it explodes involuntarily.

When a seeker explodes (whether voluntarily or involuntarily), everyone within brawling range suffers 5 points of stun, and everyone within throwing range suffers 2 points. Armor does not protect from this concussive force.

Serpents

The underground seems to be a perfect breeding ground for snakes both deadly and not. There are any number of different breeds lurking about in cracks and crevices, from highly poisonous asps only a dozen centimeters long to monstrous constrictors up to ten meters or more in length.

Given the range of serpents possible, exact details of poison damage, life points, and so on are left to the game master. But in general, snakes fall within the following parameters.

Focus: 3 to 5.

Abilities: Brawling, agility, cleverness (for hiding, only), strength, quickness.

Gear: Fangs, damage rating 0 to 2 wounds. Some have poison (see chapter seven for rules), ranging in beginning effectiveness from 3 to 10 points. Some constrict, with a damage rating of 1 to 3, rolling again each round that the victim is held.

Special Rules: The smallest serpents have only 1 life point; the largest have as many as 20.

Giant Snails

Oozing their slow way through many stretches of subterranean cavern are huge snails fully a meter long and massing up to five kilograms. Some have protective shells; others wear no protection; some few exude toxic fluids that discourage predators.

These creatures are worth particular mention here for two reasons. First, they can serve as a source of food for rogue biomechs, should the rogues happen to think of it. Second, the slime trails they leave behind could prove to be a hazard, especially in areas with already treacherous footing.

Focus: None.

Abilities: None.

Gear: Some have special glands for secreting toxic chemicals. These can cause painful blistering to human flesh that comes into contact with them.

Strangle Vine

This insidious plant is most commonly found in abandoned caverns where bats once roosted. As often as not, it is the reason that those caverns were abandoned. The vine takes root in guano deposits upon a cavern floor, then festoons itself along the walls and roof, from which it hangs in a thorny tangle. When living creatures enter its lair, the vines constrict around the victim, piercing it with their thorns and holding it while it bleeds to death. As the carcass decays, it falls in pieces to create more “soil” for the tangle vine.

Focus: 1.

Abilities: Strength (for holding its prey).

Gear: Piercing thorns, damage rating 1, and tangling vines. When a victim first enters the lair of strangle vine, the game master should make a strength roll for the vine to determine how well it entangles its victim. Each turn thereafter, the victim automatically suffers the damage rating above from bleeding. After the first turn of entanglement, the victim can attempt to break free. In order to succeed, he or she must accumulate more successes on strength rolls than the vine possesses. (Remember to apply penalty modifiers for wounds suffered.)

CHAPTER 09: BREAK AWAY (A SAMPLE ADVENTURE)

This adventure is a perfect introduction to any new Zero campaign.

First, it works as a natural launching point for the Zero story arc. The adventure begins with the player characters as contented members of the hive, plays through their lapse from the Equanimity, and deals with their struggle to elude Queen Zero's wrath and escape to safety. In doing so, it allows the players to settle into the roles of their characters and the setting of the world of Zero. It also provides the new game master with a great example of how adventures should be put together and run.

Scene 1: Dinner Break

The adventure opens in a dining hall, where the player characters and several dozen other biomechs are taking time to rest and eat. To set the stage, read the italicized text below to your players, or improvise from it.

It is meal time.

You sit with several dozen other biomechs of every caste, in a rough cavern, on stone benches, gathered around stone troughs filled with stewed vegetables which spill from openings in the walls. Most of your fellows eat with their fingers, though some few exert themselves to use telekinesis. The chatter of their mental voices fills your head. Behind that telepathic babble lies the murmur of other biomechs outside the room, fading with distance into the comforting rumble that is the Equanimity overall.

A similar rumble fills your ears. It is composed of the random shifting and chewing of the chamber's many diners, with the heavy whoosh of a ventilation fan lending a steady rhythm behind the whole. The dining cavern is dimly lit, but amid the scrawl of fluorescent tubes across the ceiling high above, you can view a two-meter fan turning lazily in the mouth of a ventilation tunnel, puffing cool air toward the floor below.

A single doorway opens into the chamber from the warren of tunnels outside. A brighter light spills from the corridor beyond that doorway, making a stark, black silhouette of the soldier on guard in the doorway. The soldier's presence comforts you, as does everything about the hive. You are safe. You are cared for. You are watched over. Placidly, you eat.

Then something changes. The food still spills forth; your companions still feed; the fan above still turns. But your mind is filled with sudden silence. Gone is the babble of voices and the larger murmur of the Equanimity. Within your mind, your own thoughts echo, alone, with no reply. Glancing around the dining chamber, you note that everyone else seems still the same, but you can no longer hear their mental conversation. Your heart starts to pound with unaccustomed fear.

What has happened?

What do you do now?

To begin the action of this scene, the game master should ask each of the players in turn what his or her character is doing in reaction to the sudden change. Most likely, some will want to sit still and pretend that nothing is different, until they can figure out what has happened. But others may decide stand up and look around, mentally shouting for attention from the Equanimity. Still others may resolve to vacate the premises immediately.

Those who sit still won't be noticed for a while. Given time, their lapse from the Equanimity will eventually betray them, however. Without that link, they have lost their innate sense of the crowds around them, and they are certain to jostle someone by accident or step on someone's toes, thereby bringing themselves to the notice of the hive mind overall. But most likely someone else among the player characters will raise a ruckus long before that happens.

Which brings us to the heroes who, faced with their lapse, decide to stand up, look around the dining hall, and mentally shout for attention from the Equanimity. While their motivation may be loyalty to the Queen, they are immediately targeted for extermination. When they shout, allow their players a telepathy roll. In this scene, one level of success is sufficient to be heard by the other biomechs in the chamber, who in turn make the Equanimity overall aware. Two levels make the shout immediately audible to the entire hive. Three levels allow eavesdropping on the Equanimity itself, in which case the hero hears it command the soldier at the door to destroy these rogues. Four levels allow the telepath to blend in with the hive mind, becoming mentally invisible to it for the duration of the scene, though the character remains a rogue at heart.

Finally, there may be those heroes who decide to get out of the room before trouble starts. They might try to slip past the guard at the door, or teleport to the corridor outside, or exit through the ventilation shaft (after dealing with the fan). They may even come up with some other plan. If it sounds reasonable, let them do it.

To this point in the adventure, there isn't any unity among the player characters. That can become something of a problem. Normally, when a party of player characters splits up during an adventure, the game master is in for headaches. Trying to keep track of several different courses of events at separate locations can be exhausting, and because the game master's attention is so divided, individual players may feel that they aren't getting enough attention. So it is generally best to work at keeping the group pretty much together. In this scene, the best tool for providing that unity is to let the heroes telepathically hear one another automatically. Whether it comes about as a result of one of them telepathically shouting or because someone scans the room for other rogues, once you have forged that party link, it gives the heroes a reason for working together.

For its part, the hive reacts to destroy these rogues immediately upon recognizing them. Those who sit and watch are safe for the moment, but will be found out in the long run. Those who stand and begin looking around are fired upon as quickly as the hive can realize that they have lapsed and give orders to the soldier at the door. Those who try to escape cause the hive to take more drastic measures. The Equanimity orders everyone in the dining chamber to remain calm and stay seated, then it orders the soldier at the door to self-destruct in a flamer tank explosion which kills everyone within the dining chamber, both rogue and faithful alike. Once they have come to the hive's atten-

tion, Queen Zero wants all the rogues dead, along with anyone who has witnessed their lapse from the Equanimity.

As game master, give the heroes every chance to escape the dining hall before deciding to have the soldier self destruct, but if they insist on remaining within the chamber, don't be afraid to kill one or two of the rogues in this explosion. After all, it's an easy enough thing to create new player characters (players of dead heroes can do this in just a few minutes time, while you continue the story with any rogues remaining), and it doesn't hurt to show the players early on in the campaign that the lives of their characters are fragile. The destruction of the dining hall also demonstrates to them the utter ruthlessness of Queen Zero.

If any of the heroes are killed, the most dramatic way to reveal this is to describe the scene from the standpoint of the survivors. Before letting these players know what has happened, turn to the players whose characters are outside the chamber, and describe to them the deafening blast, the gout of flame through the doorway, and the mass mental death cry of all the biomechs inside. Then turn back to the players of the dead heroes and say, "I'm sorry, but you'll each need to create a new character."

The mass death cry makes a perfect excuse for initiating new player characters into the group. Just assume that these new heroes are passing nearby when they are startled by that cry of pain and horror, and are jolted from the Equanimity as a result.

Soldier 4455

The soldier stationed at the main door to the dining hall in this scene is designated 4455. Normally, soldier 4455 has only one duty—to guard the door. But as the player characters start to lapse, she is suddenly assigned to deal with the threat. The first weapon she uses is the shotgun; any levels of damage the target dodges (with an agility roll) hit innocent bystanders instead. Her knife is reserved for defense at close range, and her flamer is too messy for use against individual targets in a crowded chamber. Of course, once she receives the order, that flamer makes a fine fire bomb.

Focus: 6.

Abilities: Brawling, shooting, agility, willpower, telepathy, teleportation.

Gear: Flamer (left arm), shotgun (right arm), knife (bayonet on shotgun), 1-point dermal armor.

Special Notes: Soldier 4455 can ignite her own flamer fuel tank, causing it to explode in a fireball that

incinerates everyone within the dining chamber. Don't even bother rolling damage; just consider the attack an automatic kill. Characters in the hall immediately outside the chamber suffer four points of stun from the shock wave and heat. Each level of success they gain with an agility or strength roll (not both) reduces that damage by one point.

If soldier 4455 proves to be too little a challenge to your heroes, keep in mind that there certainly must be other soldiers eating within the dining hall at the moment, which gives you an excuse to even the odds. You can either use 4455's statistics again for these extra soldiers, or change a few details to make them slightly different.

Scene 2: On the Run

Having witnessed first hand the ruthlessness of the hive when it comes to dealing with rogues, the heroes probably won't want to hang around to see what happens next. That's especially true when you tell them that they can hear multiple footsteps converging upon their current location. At this point, it's time to read the following text aloud to the players.

After the explosion, your ears ring for a few moments, but you can hear mentally the confused queries of biomechs in the general vicinity. It would seem that Queen Zero somehow sheltered the rest of the hive from the full knowledge of what transpired in the dining hall. Other than the Queen and her aides, you and your current companions are the only ones who know what has just happened.

As you struggle to come to grips with the implications, your hearing slowly recovers. You begin to notice the tramp of many feet from surrounding corridors, converging on this spot!

It's time once again to ask the players what they want their characters to do. The basic choices are to flee for the outskirts of the hive, or to stay and see who's coming, or to try to find some place nearby in which to hide. Of course, if any of the players comes up with some other course of action and it seems reasonable, you are free to run with it if you like. But most likely they will decide upon one of the courses above.

Ideally, the heroes will all decide to flee the hive. The rest of the adventure is designed with that course

of action in mind. Once they are up and moving, they encounter each of the events below. To keep them on the move, just make it clear to the players that the hive continues to search for the rogues.

On the other hand, any heroes who decide to wait to find out what the sound of tramping feet forebodes are pretty much doomed. Those footsteps are the sound of dozens of well-armed soldiers converging upon the dining hall from every direction. If the heroes wait until those troops arrive, their chance of escape is effectively zero, unless you decide to be lenient. The hive's soldiers fire on the player characters upon sight, and there are so many that you needn't even roll dice to see if they hit. Unless the players come up with some brilliant plan for escape ("We all join hands and teleport away together, suffering whatever stun is necessary to gain maximum success," for instance), their characters are dead. In that case, you can begin the adventure from scratch with entirely new heroes.

Lastly, some players may come up with the idea of finding someplace to hide nearby. In the vicinity of the dining hall, there are any number of little-used tunnels, forgotten niches, and abandoned chambers, many of them paneled over at some point or another, or used for storage of forgotten gear. If they think to ask about such places, the players can have their characters hide out for a few hours in one of them, while they discuss what to do next. But again, if the action lags too much, remind the players that the hive is searching for the rogues. One of the best reminders is to have a search party discover them, whether telepathically or by stumbling across the hiding place. Once they are discovered, allow the heroes to fight their way to freedom, as long as this gets them on the move again.

The search parties seeking the rogues at this point consist of mobile, lightly armed soldiers supplemented by drones. You can adjust the numbers of each to give your heroes something of a fight, without overwhelming them. After all, it's still early in the adventure.

Search Party Soldier

Focus: 5.

Abilities: Shooting, agility, cleverness, quickness, telepathy.

Gear: Two blasters.

Special Notes: These soldiers rely upon cleverness and telepathy to track down the rogues, and quickness to pursue them. Unfortunately, this means that the soldiers are not terribly well equipped to battle the rogues once they have been located. Consequently,

the soldiers are supplemented by an equal number of drones outfitted for close-in fighting.

Search Party Drone

Focus: 9.

Abilities: Brawling, throwing, agility, cleverness, strength, quickness, willpower, telekinesis, telepathy.

Gear: Neural whip, axe.

Special Notes: These drones focus upon getting close enough to an enemy to stun him or her with the whip, then finish off the victim with the axe. They are frightening in close quarters, but if the heroes can maneuver them into long corridors and gain some distance upon them, the whip and axe quickly become useless.

Scene 3: The Locked Door

Once you have the heroes fully committed to movement, it's time to throw a roadblock in the way. Read the following text aloud to the players.

You have been following a little-used corridor for some time now, headed toward regions uninhabited by the hive...headed toward freedom. From time to time, sounds of pursuit can still be heard from behind. On occasion, the corridor straightens for a long stretch, and your pursuers fire a wild blaster shot or two. Obviously Queen Zero doesn't want to let you go!

You and your companions press on, trying to increase your lead. Then, suddenly, disaster. You round a bend to discover that the corridor ahead ends in a closed door, with no means evident to open it.

As the heroes flee the hive, pursued by Zero's soldiers, they are forced to take an occasional side trek to avoid a guard post or a flanking maneuver by their pursuers. Consequently, while they continue to head in the general direction they desire, it isn't down passage-ways with which they are familiar. That is why they now find themselves unexpectedly confronting a closed door at the end of a dark tunnel.

The fact that the tunnel is dark gives a clue to one of the two problems to be solved before the door can be opened: There is no power running to the area. The ceiling lights are dead, as are the door's automatic controls. In order to get past this door, then, the heroes will need to restore power to those controls. First, they need to open a maintenance panel in the wall next to the door. Then they have to splice a power pack from a stunner, blaster, or pulse cannon to the wiring inside,

to activate the controls. The trouble is, that will drain all the power from the weapon. Let the heroes debate who is going to sacrifice his or her weapon's power for this purpose. If none of them has such a weapon, they will have to capture one from their pursuers somehow. Once a power pack has been located, it takes three levels of success on an electronics roll to make the connection and power up the controls.

The second problem with the door is that it was designed ages ago, and is intended to be voice activated. All a person has to say is "Door, open" to make the thing work. The trouble is that, given that the hive has since gone entirely telepathic, the heroes aren't likely to realize this fact. If any archivists in the group study the door intently, they may notice the grille above it, which contains a microphone. Four cumulative levels of success on cleverness rolls allow a hero to realize what the grille is for, but all castes except archivist suffer a two-point penalty modifier to their rolls. (Fewer successes than this mean that the character has some inkling of an idea, and realizes that the grille is significant, but hasn't yet figured out what it is for.) Once the grille's purpose has been divined, a single success on a willpower roll is needed to actually utter the words, "Door, open." Because the heroes have never spoken audibly before, it is a struggle for them to do so coherently.

There are a few other ways of getting past the door. But all of them are more difficult. For instance, once the controls have been powered, a character can try to reroute the wiring to make the door open. This requires six cumulative levels of success. Or characters might try to open it by main strength (ten levels of success, though only two characters can try at a time), or by telekinesis (again requiring ten levels of success).

To complicate the issue, however, pursuers begin to catch up to the heroes while they are working. Someone has to keep them occupied if the characters dealing with the door are to concentrate. Once the heroes have had a few minutes to examine the door, have a pair of soldiers show up at the far end of the corridor (roughly a hundred meters away) and begin firing upon them from around the corner. (See the statistics for search-party soldiers in the previous scene.) Every five combat turns or so, you can have another soldier show up, if you like, especially if the heroes are putting them down quickly. Ideally, once the heroes get the door open and scramble through, there should be enough soldiers firing upon them that the closing door rattles with the impact of multiple blaster shots.

Scene 4: Temptation

Once on the other side of the voice-activated door, the heroes are almost free from pursuit. But the hive still has a trick or two up its sleeves. Read the following text aloud to the players.

The strange door slides shut behind you, separating you from your pursuers, at least for the moment. Still, you can feel it radiating the heat of their concerted blaster fire. You cannot help but wonder how long the door will hold them off.

The corridor is very dark on this side of the door. The only light is a dim orange glow from some place far ahead. It gives just enough illumination for you to realize that the walls are rough rock, and the floor is very uneven. From the looks of things, you are in a natural cavern, unshaped by the hive.

As you stand and take in your new surroundings, the mental touch of the Equanimity returns.

The hive is determined to destroy these rogues before they can escape any further. To that end, it now sets about turning the heroes themselves against one another. Queen Zero whispers a different thought into each of the character's mind. As game master, you should write these messages on scraps of paper and pass them out to the players individually, letting them read their message in private.

Soldiers in the group receive the following thought. "Turn your weapons upon the others and destroy them, and I will make you one of my elite guard. You will be terrible in your might, and I will honor you forever."

Other characters are told, "Please forgive us. There has been a malfunction in the Equanimity. A traitor sought to overthrow the queen and take her place. In the confusion, you were targeted mistakenly. Return to the hive, and all will be as it was before, except that, for your loyalty, you will be elevated to four-digit status. Return to us, and feel our acceptance once again."

Give the players some time to size up one another. They all know that everyone present received a folded message from you, but they cannot be certain just what the other messages say. Let them role-play the situation for a few minutes, then ask everyone to write on the back of their message what their character is going to do next. (Don't forget to have them write their names on the slips of paper.) Collect those paper slips and look them over, then start a round of combat, if anyone plans to attack the others.

Ideally, of course, everyone will shake off Zero's offer (especially the soldiers in the group).

Once this situation has been resolved, it's time to move on to the final scene of the adventure.

Scene 5: End of the Road

Shortly after the heroes have all dealt with Queen Zero's temptation, the door through which they have just come begins to glow redly, as if their pursuers are about to burn through from the other side. Read the following text aloud to the players.

As suddenly as it came, Queen Zero's mental contact abandons you again. The only thoughts you perceive are those of your companions.

A spot of red begins to glow in the center of the door behind you. It brightens even as you watch, to orange, then yellow, and finally white, giving off increasing heat as it does so. Hot sparks begin to jump from it. Your pursuers are burning their way through.

If the heroes want to escape, they need to move on, while the door still holds off their pursuers. They will have to take some care in the dark, uneven tunnel ahead, however. Anyone who tries to run must pass an agility roll or fall and suffer two points of stun damage.

Not long after the heroes begin to move on, the sounds of pursuit resume, which means the door has been breached.

The tunnel twists and winds, the floor rising and falling. Stalactites and stalagmites decorate the passage, sometimes nearly choking it off entirely. In places, pools of chilly water cover the floor. In other places, the heroes have to clamber up steep slopes. Once in a while, a long, straight section of tunnel allows for a wild blaster shot from the soldiers behind. (In terms of the story, these shots are merely stage setting. Roll the dice as if trying to hit, but regardless of the result, they narrowly miss.)

After many minutes of this travel, the heroes notice that the tunnel begins to widen rapidly, and a hot, sulfurous stench fills the air. Then, unexpectedly, the passage opens out onto a narrow cliff in a cavern fully a kilometer across. A thousand meters or more below, a wide river of flaming lava snakes along the cavern floor. Above the cliff, the rock wall rises steeply another several hundred meters, steadily

curving over to join the ceiling. A biomech might be able to climb it for a while, but from this vantage point no other exits can be seen.

Give the players a few moments to discuss ideas for what their characters are going to do now, but don't let them forget that the pursuers are closing in. In reality, there isn't much of anything that the heroes can do to save themselves. Your job, at this point, is to let them figure that out. If they had time, they might be able to work out a safe climbing route up the rock wall, but they can't do that while being fired upon from below.

Once you judge that the dramatic tension has about peaked, and before the players start to get frustrated, the heroes find that several ropes are lowered to them from somewhere above. They catch a glimpse of humanoids in silvery suits peering over the edge of another cliff several hundred meters up. Once they have been spotted, these strangers slip back into the tunnel from which they came, and disappear.

Although the heroes don't know it, these creatures are androids who dwell outside the hive. (See their description in chapter eight.) Drawn to the ruckus of the heroes escape from the hive, the androids have decided to lend a hand, but they aren't

yet ready to make friends of the player characters. Instead, they want to watch the heroes for some time yet, to judge their nature. So by the time the heroes have climbed the ropes to safety, the androids have slipped away. Naturally, being machines, their thoughts do not register telepathically, which should make them an enigma to the heroes.

(Normally, this sort of *deus ex machina* rescue is something a game master should avoid in preparing an adventure. As much as possible, for the sake of the players' satisfaction, the heroes should work out their own salvation. But sometimes the rules are made to be broken, and in this case, it allows the androids to be planted in your campaign as potential friends of the heroes.)

Having reached the safety of a higher cliff, the heroes discover another tunnel leading away from this immense cavern. Of course, if they want to end the pursuit, they need to do something about the ropes...

That taken care of, they have accomplished their escape from the hive, and the current adventure is ended. It is time for you to award experience points. But for future adventures, there are now more tunnels to explore, and at least one strange race of peoples to be investigated.

ABILITIES

COMBAT ABILITIES

Focus	Abilities	Prior
☐	Brawling	☐
☐	Throwing	☐
☐	Shooting	☐
☐	Combat Psionics	☐

PERSONAL ABILITIES

Focus	Abilities	Prior
☐	Agility	☐
☐	Cleverness	☐
☐	Strength	☐
☐	Quickness	☐
☐	Willpower	☐

PSIONIC ABILITIES

Focus	Abilities	Prior
☐	Telegnosis	☐
☐	Telekinesis	☐
☐	Telepathy	☐
☐	Teleportation	☐
☐	Telergy	☐
☐	Telesthesia	☐

TRAINED ABILITIES

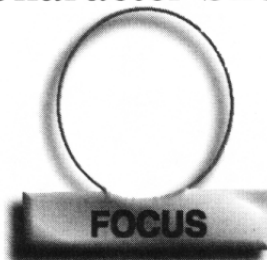
Focus	Abilities	Prior
☐	Computer	☐
☐	Electronics	☐
☐	Hydroponics	☐
☐	Mechanics	☐
☐	Medicine	☐
☐	Piloting	☐

OTHER ABILITIES

Focus	Abilities	Prior
☐		☐
☐		☐
☐		☐
☐		☐
☐		☐
☐		☐
☐		☐
☐		☐
☐		☐
☐		☐

ZERO™

Character Sheet



Caste _____

Name _____

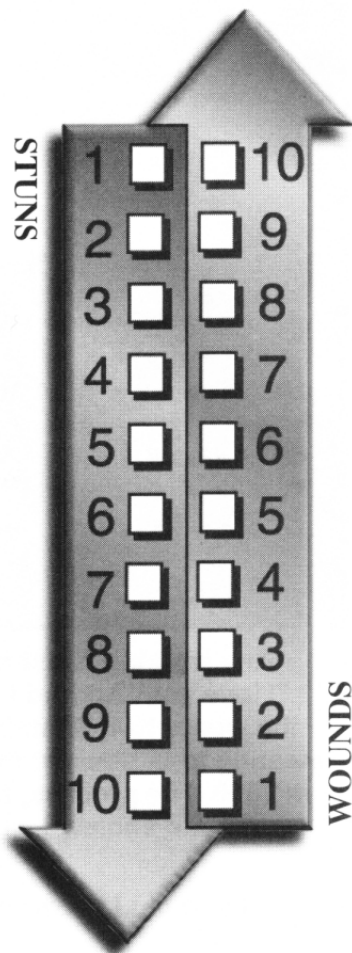
Experience _____

Player _____

CASTE ABILITY

WEAPONS

GEAR



LIFE LINE

- Heal one stun per hour
- Heal one wound per day
- +1 to each roll per wound

NOTES

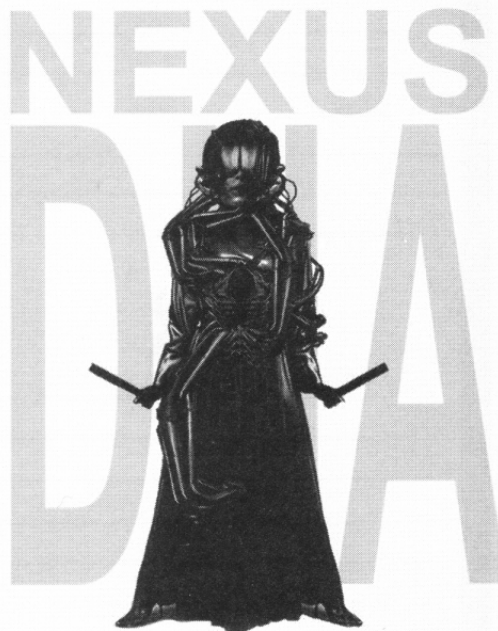


Any working Artist today will know how rare the following words are from any Producer, "I love your Art and I want to base an entire game project around your work..." Those were the words Ken Whitman used before we had even finished out introductory handshake. Our meeting took place at the first Gen Con exhibition I had ever undertaken at the invitation of TSR in 1996. The process, that Ken had in mind, was very simple - I would produce images of any world and society I wished to invent and Ken would have the best writer he could find work from those images.

Little did I know then that the best writer he could find would turn out to be one of the best that can be found. Mr Lester Smith.

Twelve months later, through an endless sea of transatlantic e-mails and faxes we have the beginning of a game saga that I am proud to be part of : ZERO.

My deepest thanks to both Ken and Lester.
STEVE STONE, OCTOBER 1997. UK.



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Living in the Equanimity is the way of Life. All minds functioning as one to keep the world alive. As long as we all work together, we are prospering. As long as we are of one mind, we are happy. As long as we do not question, we are safe. And when you try to change the way things are, your chances of surviving are....

...ZERO



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