

HARLEQUIN

WRITTEN BY KEN ST. ANDRE, W.G. ARMINTROUT, TOM DOWD, JERRY EPPERSON, JOHN FAUGHNAN, JAMES D. LONG, PAUL R. HUME, and LESTER W. SMITH.

CONCEPT BY TOM DOWD AND SAM LEWIS

PUBLISHED BY THE FASA CORPORATION

WINNER, 1990 ORIGINS AWARD, BEST ROLE-PLAYING ADVENTURE

This product cost about \$15.00-18.00 when I bought it in 1990. It is out of print as of this writing. The review was requested by Charlie Collins, winner of our Gaming Geek Trivia Challenge. Go borrow his copy.

The credits page lays it out cold: "Concept, Overall Story, and General Blame: Tom Dowd and Sam Lewis." And man, these guys have a lot to answer for.

Shadowrun, for those who do not know, is FASA's game of the cyberpunk future with a unique twist: three generations ago, magic returned to the earth. And we're not talking gosh-Mulder-looks-like-a-coincidence-to-me kind of magic. We're talking the yo-boy-half-the-world-has-pointy-ears-and-dragons-are-on-the-Fortune-500 kind. Shadowrun's designers asked the thorny question, "if supernatural forces were proven incontrovertibly real, how would the world react to it?"

The answer is, "chaotically."

Magic becomes a weapon of the oppressed, a dangerous mutative force, and a miraculous saving grace. The future history of Shadowrun is possibly the most complex and detailed of any world in fantasy role-playing to date, because it is built on our own past and present. All of our planet's difficulties, from loose nukes in the former Soviet Union to resource wars in West Africa to the destruction of the tropical rainforests, begin right where we leave off in the early 2000s.

And on top of this, sixty years follow in which children are born with strange mutations the media dubs "elf" and "dwarf" subspecies; the awakening of Great Dragons who buzz Japanese bullet trains or go on talk shows for a healthy profit; and the indigenous peoples of just about everywhere slap colonialist Western nations in their scientifically-minded snoots. The Native American reclamation movement begins a Great Ghost Dance to put the one of the 1890s to shame, leading to a bloody guerrilla war of tornados versus fighter jets on U.S. soil. Just as the Treaty of Denver fractures the United States, the world is hit with magical viruses devastating its population; many adults undergo the painful growth spurts transforming them into "orks" and "trolls" distinct from those of other games. Though the Pope declares them human and says magic is an expression of God's will, riots and hate groups say otherwise

It gets uglier. Colleges teach courses in sorcery to remain competitive in the new marketplace. Mind-control scandals erupt over rock musicians. Insect spirits start up cults, and Dunkelzahn, a popular dragon with his own television show, runs for President and is assassinated with a subtactical nuclear weapon.

Through all of this, the nagging question in the game products was the one asked by the scientist within us all: was the magic always here?

Some hints were dropped by the developers early on, but Harlequin up-ended the bag. It let on that several dragons and elves survived the five millennia since the last magical age. The full story of this took up about seven years and a heap of adventures, sourcebooks, novels, and even an entire second game line, Earthdawn.

This was the good part.

The bad part was that every second-fiddle player who got a notion to GM wanted to whip these elves and dragons out for no other reason than to show that he could. And I swear, I played in a game with every damn one of them.

Fortunately, these years are fading in my memory now, and my beef with Mr. Dowd and Mr. Lewis is not much more than precedent. I don't want to critique game designers by their fanboys, because that would mean I'd have to meet them. It also means this review would be 200 pages long instead of its more current, modest size. (Charlie, you bastard, I'm never doing a review of an eight-adventure set again.) Let us get to the point and the plot, because Harlequin is a pretty neat book.

Once upon a time in the sixteenth century, when the magic of the earth was sleeping, two of the ancient elves had it out in a rapier duel. In the game year of your choice (2050-2062) Harlequin (a.k.a. "wacky yet wise immortal #1") tries to settle the score from this duel by targeting Ebran the Scribe (a.k.a. "anal yet retentive immortal #2"). But he doesn't want to kill him. Instead, he's gonna instruct proxies (the player characters) to take things representing what Ebran loves and hates, his past, present, and future, and his physical and spiritual selves. And just to extend the magical "I coulda capped yo ass" middle finger extra far, Harlequin's pawns will give back whatever he stole from the last run. In this fashion, Ebran will be elaborately and symbolically defeated, for there will be nothing in this world that he possesses that Harlequin cannot control, and Ebran, being immortal, will have to live with it for eternity.

Harlequin is an eight-adventure set, laid out neatly with FASA's thorough adventure format that I wish other game companies would use. Each adventure consists of six or so important scenes. They are divided into a few paragraphs of canned description to get you going ("Tell It To Them Straight"), the setting details, action of the scene, and any surprises ("Behind the Scenes"), and ways to ensure story continuity when the players open up their haversacks full of monkeywrenches ("Debugging"). Adventures after about 1992 added the "Hooks" section, covering the mood of the scene and small details to get it across, such as props.

With this step-by-step planning, Shadowrun gave many of its uninitiated players a taste of story-based gamemastering. Granted, the early stories were often "Here's the target, here's the security, whip out the C-4, Adolfo," but each published adventure expanded upon this, and Harlequin did it more than most. Though the individual episodes follow the "fortress assault" pattern of assignment-research-execution-complication-climax, Harlequin creates the mystery of how these missions were connected and then answers it.

General Trends

Overall, Harlequin runs pretty well. Despite some serious layout and editing omissions, including ending the gamemaster information chapter mid-way through the description of the title character, I and many other gamemasters managed to make do. If there is a flaw in Harlequin's writing, it is in the same vein -- omission.

The writing styles have been smoothed down to the point where eight adventures fit in 152 pages, each one with a map of the target area. This means a lot of game statistics are condensed into references to the standard archetypes or Sprawl Sites (later reprinted in the booklet sold with the gamemaster's screen). It also means the read-aloud text summarizes several opening scenes quickly and abruptly, rather than letting characters act and interact. And, ultimately, it errs on the side of giving too little information rather than too much. Staging hints and behind-the-scenes explanations are kept terse, so getting a full roleplaying experience rather than a series of interesting combat settings requires a little work.

As a stat-monkey note, Harlequin converts rather well to Second Edition. I don't mean that the opponents' statistics are necessarily tough or even very appropriate in all cases, but the sudden shift to deadlier firearms means PCs can't blithely wade into (okay, out of) combat. Even if they can get away with it at first, the variety of fight scenes will teach a nasty lesson to any lone munchkin. (Lexical note: a "munchkin" in Shadowrun is a combat machine who doesn't know when to use a silencer. Combat machines who do use silencers are called "team players" or "me chummer here," at least until you find someone else who provides as much cover.)

Finally, one should not rule this adventure set out for White Wolf games, particularly Vampire and Werewolf. Replacing Harlequin and Ebran with an ancient Malkavian and Ventrue and your PCs being a hit squad at the behest of various princes, archons, and Justicars wouldn't make for the worst campaign in the world.

"PHYSICAL"

The first adventure is a milk run. No, check that. In Shadowrun, a jaunt down to the Stuffer Shack often ends up with you fighting a chromed-up psycho chick with a shotgun, an Unarmed Combat skill of 6 and a 3D6+8 Initiative roll. "Physical" should be called "Breaking and Entering For Dummies," making it an ideal first game session.

Given the prodigious ass size of most starting player characters ('cause you've got a few books' worth of cyberware, spells, and equipment crammed up each one) it's really unlikely "Physical" will defeat them. But let's plan for the worst.

A Formative Lesson In Modern Roleplaying

The Mister Johnson, a pseudonym for "the guy who is hiring you and thus providing the plot," is a cash-cart dwarf by the moniker of "J.P. Morlock." The characters are supposed to come to an appointed building at an appointed time (an opening for nearly every Shadowrun adventure, by the way) for an interview. As a pre-hiring test to see if the runners can deal with violence appropriately, he's got some ork thugs waiting in the elevator to his office, with instructions to get in the PCs' faces. Because Shadowrun ideally creates characters who can get in and out of places silently, the idea is, the PCs are not supposed to say "Mmm! Four orks in a ten-by-ten room! I think me longsword be paintin' the lift in Hobgoblin Hemoglobin!" and letting out the heavy metal.

Instead, the proper response is something sane. Bluffing, distracting them, or bribing them at a cost of \$5,000 are all given as options. Sure, the price is pretty high for an elevator shakedown, but these guys are supposed to be unreasonable. Their game stats are functional if you want lower-end player characters to trash them, but given an ork's +3 Body and +2 Strength, these guys seem more like Screen Actors' Guild strikers paying the rent instead of Muscle Beach bad-asses. This is okay.

What amazes me, considering the amount of thought put into this encounter, is that there is no mention of the simplest solution possible. Four times I have gamed with this adventure, and four times the players have chorused, "We take the stairs." Yes, this is our world, fire codes exist. Be prepared.

Patch #1: The encounter can easily be skipped, but if you want to give a little more characterization, it's not so tough.

Simply change the location to a Redmond Barrens office building condemned in the 2029 Computer Crash and ignored ever since. The heroes look for the meeting address, and there's a pile of orks outside playing stoop-monkey because the air conditioning is on the fritz. If it's not too hot, maybe they've got a pickup game of Post-Apoc Basketball going using the smashed-out windshield of two burned-out cars like soccer goals. The guys on the impromptu tenements ain't un-planting their stair-stuck asses, covering the only way up.

Now the orks are saying it's their place, and if someone is gonna keep them from watching the game, "you and me are gonna do this on the pavement." Glares. Growls.

This makes them a bit more of an obstacle. All of the usual Charisma Tests for intimidation, distraction, or negotiation apply, but it also opens up the prospect for players to bet they can out-play them in a quick game of

Post-A-B, resolved with Athletics tests (or Throwing for the free-throw contest).

If the characters do something weirdo like use their hydraulic jacks to leap to the second story (it happens...Shadowrun players are notorious for playing with toys), the orks bust out laughing, try to recruit the guy for basketball, or call him a stanky slot for showing off his cybernetics and not tough like a real man.

Once inside, the characters can find Morlock's posh suite as a lesson that things aren't always what they appear to be. Morlock keeps the place looking dilapidated on the outside on purpose (he gets hassling phone calls from the city government now and then about condemning the place, but he pays off the inspectors). The orks outside aren't a gang, they're just locals. Or, alternatively, the orks all walk in afterwards and ask Mr. Morlock how their auditions went. Turns out he knows some folks in simsense and they're hopeful actor imports from L.A..

A Few Lessons On Redundant Game Design

After a little haggling for money, our heroes then spend the rest of their time on the mission, figuring how to get over an electric fence, past the dogs and guards, and into the safe. Good, straightforward this-is-the-situation-what-do-you-do writing here. The choice of barghests (who use a paralyzing howl), an electric fence set to stun, and rent-a-cops with stun batons allows you to pull no punches because the punches aren't very hard. Starting player characters can hose the alarm and kill everyone on site with spells and guns pretty easily...which brings up the question, do they want to?

If so, bring out the stick: Lone Star Security Services. The dark-future cops, according to the Lone Star sourcebook, carry Ruger Thunderbolts, burst-fire magnum pistols wicked enough to kill trolls in body armor. Worse, they've got radios and backup. Even if the players give as many casualties as they take, they've lost. More cops will hunt their wounded butts down until one day the BATF knocks on their door.

But the lesson for game writers is here: there are clues to the metaplot planted in "Physical," but it does not matter if the players ever see them, and thus, they cannot de-rail the plot by omission. The information implanted in the Matrix is the hint: the pixelated rapier of challenge, and the restricted genealogical information dating back to 1834, something that should not be in a book publishing company, and certainly not in a heavily secured node that Morlock told them not to crack.

This quickly turns into the old Garden of Eden problem: do the shadowrunners try to find out the whole story and figure out if their assignment is doing right or wrong? Or do they say "I have no need to know" and get screwed by Johnson after Johnson? In my experience, about 75% of players will take the latter, because it's easier, and 95% of player groups will end up doing so just out of inertia. Why think when you don't have to?

We'll come back to the metastory as it unfolds.

"HATES"

Okay, here's an up-close moral thorn. In our second adventure, some sick fraghead wants to hire you to find six people and mutilate them. Cut their little silicon-injected ear tips off. The Johnson shows you photos of people they allegedly killed with swords and arrows, and lays out a few options on how the runners can scope the place out; notably the Department of Public Works will have a map of the place. Alternatively, the PCs can dress up like an elf poser themselves and do some undercover work.

Either way, there's some bad news. The plot is, your protags do a raid on a heavily armed howdy-house full of some policlubbers called the Association Para Nobilis. There are 25 of these guys hanging out in an old fire station about 23 meters in length. In other words, if one unsilenced gunshot goes off, there will be at most two or three walls and about 75 feet between our heroes and a huge mob of folks who believe in serious home defense. The average Elrond here packs a machine pistol; the guards, submachine guns. Neither model is the deadliest thing in the game, but one loud bang will mean a phenomenal amount of screams and untrained lead.

Not that this stops anyone.

Indeed, I have never seen this run pulled off with more than a few electrons of restraint once the first shot is fired. It becomes a house-to-house killing spree of the exact sort Violence: The Roleplaying Game later presented as a satire. This happens despite the warnings that the fire house is literally in the shadow of the Renraku Arcology (home of the Red Samurai security forces) and downtown Seattle is heavily patrolled by Lone Star.

The situation did not give most of my gamers pause. They were quite willing to believe Mr. Johnson's photos were real (hey, the adventure was written before Photoshop) and declare the APN were bad people in need of a high-caliber fixin'. The text supports this: all but Fierelle are described as being nutballs who want to kill cops, shadowrunners, and anyone who doesn't support the "Elven ideal." And the stats work out pretty well: the APN aren't too bright, aren't too fast, and can't hit drek, except for the few hard-core leaders obsessed with killing.

What feels slightly off is that once the shooting starts, a small child, Maria, runs into the room where the runners find Fierelle and screams not to hurt her. At this point, any nagging doubts about homicide coalesce into a clear picture.

Lots of players enjoy vicariously running through the house letting fly with more firepower than a tag-team of Neo and James Bond...but when the moment of clarity hits, they look around at their running partners and wonder when they became Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. They've played executioner without being clear on the whole "judge and jury" part of the equation. And the run is remembered as a nightmare, not an action movie.

Controlling the Emotional Arc

While one could just chuck Maria and make the run a first-person-shooter sort of game, I'd prefer a bit more potential depth and closure to the adventure.

To do this, you've got to build Xeric and the APN up before you tear them down.

Once you get a handle on the APN leaders as characters, you can take them anywhere. This is particularly important

since shadowrunners with duct tape and vans may have the same idea.

The satisfying ending you want to work towards is having the PCs walk off into the credits while Xeric the Mad watches his little empire fall apart around him and goes back to being Rhinegold Wadsworth from Snohomish.

Maybe it will be getting his ass kicked in a parking lot that makes him crack. Maybe it will be watching Fierelle walk out on him, or Maria spit in his face, or watching either of them get shot by an elven shadowrunner. In any case, the heroes should provoke this moment when the lie dies.

"Hates" becomes about beating the snot out of these fools without sinking to their level of murder. It's about cutting their ear tips off so they see their hypocrisy in the mirror every morning. It's dropping the frontispiece of "Mankind Ascendant" in Xeric's lap to remind him what real elves actually believe in. The final stanza in the poetic justice is to cause such a ruckus Lone Star shows up after the runners are gone, and has probable cause to arrest the whole lot of them on possession of unregistered firearms and the three missiles upstairs.

Patch #2: If It's Called "Hates," Get Personal

When those photos hit the table at Takuri's, you should let the players know that Charlie Tarrow takes her job deadly seriously, and they're going to be doing the same. It's the first we hear of the antagonist: make it a good first impression.

To help perpetrate this illusion, first give the runners an earful of the APN leaders' prior convictions. Charlie could hand over their police records, and they're ugly: juvenile detention records for biting off another child's nose, BTL possession, and a year or two for aggravated assault are the order of the day. It's not inconceivable that Xeric found the Elven unity cause the way many folks find God...in prison. A SIN number change, and then he got outfitted with cyberware like a legitimate citizen. The cops can't prove a thing other than that the new identity has a stupid name like "Allair Shadowdeath" or "Blaine Deathedge."

The point is to give our heroes a little motivation. Runners often see the hiring scene as the place where they have one of three options: say yes, say no, or negotiate for a higher price and then say yes. The amount they are willing to pay is determined by the gamemaster, right?

Far from it. This can be a place to illuminate characters in a way as complex as any L5R discussion of bushido. When you are given absolute freedom, your decisions define who you are.

Just what does Charlie have to do to get you to promise you'll take a human life? Or six? Or twenty-five? If your morals are such that you are repulsed by the idea of it, why do you not turn Charlie in? If you walk away to claim the high ground, will she not just hire a more demented thug than yourself?

Of course, if they do stalk off, disgusted, the interlinked adventure falls apart. But if you make the hit on the APN personal, it could inspire the players to see this through in a way more interesting than a rampage. This is why I suggest that Charlie nod thoughtfully when the subject of price on human life comes up. She says that she wouldn't want them to make an uninformed decision. If they like, they should meet some APN members before discussing costs.

'Cause when they do, she's sure they're gonna kill these bastards for free.

Reconnaissance by a runner dressing up as a potential convert should be met with more than just the rhetoric posted at the beginning of the "Hates" section. That

quotation represents the highest ideal of the APN when it was founded...which is sort of like quoting Nietzsche before explaining the Aryan Nation. He might have built the car, but he sure ain't the driver at the wheel. Make it clear these guys are hatemongers as bad as the Humanis that persecute them.

Their rhetoric probably goes like this: Magically active elves of pure thought are the highest ideal; if you're human, your genetic relation to elves will manifest when activated by elven magic; at this (hypothetical) time, you will become pure of mind and body and get whatever you want: those bastard human cops will be shot, you will be loved by elf women, you will become special and magical, and so forth.

Why? Because of course the entire natural world has been already going in this direction. The ancient Nordic/German legends of the Vanir and Alfheim, see, are actually referring to the glory days of magic before humans messed it all up. Tolkien recognized that magic would return to the earth, as did (big smile from Xeric) Hitler, who was obsessed with the occult. His description of the war between the super-men and sub-humans obviously meant he was trying to purge the base humanity out of humans and make way for the elves. One can see this in the Aryan characteristics he picked out as superior: blonde and red hair? Tall? Generally clean-shaven and beautiful in every way? No coincidence there. Those are the features that indicate the elven-ness of a human who doesn't have enough magic in his genetic structure to transform.

Alas, Hitler just had the misfortune to be born at the wrong time, which in Xeric's patter, makes him either a persecuted hero or a horrible villain, depending on what the listener wants to hear. But have no fear...Xeric isn't gonna make ol' Adolph's mistakes.

What's that you say? There are Congo elves and Chinese elves and a billion other non-Aryan expressions of the metatype? Sure, technically, but c'mon, we all know the Northern European elf is the elf. The others being genetically identical, that's shoddy evidence from human scientists from the UCAS, and CAS, racist governments hostile to Tir Tairngire and Tir Nan Og and afraid of losing power. Just listen to these accidental remarks made by their senators. And watch this footage of elves being dragged behind a truck and the footage of the Alamos 20,000 firebombings. Read the news! You'll see it everywhere!

You want to do something about it? Tonight, put the pantyhose on your head. We're gonna drop by a Stuffer Shack with an elven store manager and cut him the frag up. Keep the cute human girls around. Where do you think the anti-human slang "breeder" comes from?

Now, with a good Perception test, let them see in advance that Fierelle and Maria are uncomfortable, so it makes sense that they might do something about it later. Maybe Fierelle leaves the room when the APN breaks into their own hateful filk songs. But there's nowhere in this tiny fire station you can escape the insipid lyrics. "My eyes have seen the glory of the breeding of the elf/We're taking all the humans' hos and humping them ourself/We got the guts of tech-boy keebies in jars up on the shelf/Our truth is marching on..."

This might be funny if they didn't believe in it.

Fierelle, for her part, sits in her room, talking to the artificial people in her simsense chips, or archiving old photos on her computer. She has a lot of marks on her calendar...all about dead people. And she cries a little when she hears the voices of those who pass for her friends these days.

Everyone in this building is human. They just don't want to be.

"PAST"

Next, the characters take a ride to where eagles dare, Schloss Munchmaussen in Bavaria. They drop off the refrigerated ear tips of the APN members and take "Pandemonicus Faustus," a book Ehman wrote centuries ago, from the eccentric troll baron who owns the castle.

The hiring meet takes place at "After," a bar that looks like a bomb hit it. There are no statistics for the Mr. Johnson, nor even a reference to the standard statistics in the Shadowrun core rules, but thanks to those numbers, the work-around is easy.

Have Any Strangers Asked You To Carry Any Packages?

The refrigerated valise given to them doesn't look like a Westinghouse with a roll-out freezer, it's a briefcase with a "250" in digital readout, and the first thing that runners will think is "bomb." This illustrates a good principle of herding players along a plot: if you've got something you don't want them to look at closely, make it something they want to get rid of at the first opportunity.

However, you should be prepared for players to distrust Mr. Johnson. The first question out of their mouths ought to be, "Uh, and we're supposed to take this through airport security?" Even if the "medical supplies" line gets the images of them getting busted or bombed out of their head, expect them to call up a good fixer or street doc contact with access to an X-ray.

However, I don't think this is a flaw, since the valise is written to be shipped in with their weaponry once they reach the schloss. Also, letting them know the contents through good research can encourage them to search for answers and connections between adventures, and thus care more at the end.

A slight trouble spot: Ms. Johnson has no detail about her whatsoever, and there's precious little about the Baron. This brings up the eternal problem of information management in **Shadowrun**. Too little information can mean runners refuse the job or chicken out once they see his fortress; too much means they'll take forever planning.

Patch #3: The Johnson's name is Eulalie Fortier, an upper manager in Fabrique Nationale, the Belgian arms manufacturer. After speaking with "Chopin," a fellow jet-setter in Monaco, she was contacted through a double-blind drop with an envelope with the same laughing-jester wax imprint on several of Harlequin's packages. She doesn't know who "Chopin" actually is, except that he is Elven and quite personable. Despite her apparent wealth, she will claim to be doing this for the money. In fact, Eulalie has made few friends in the corporate world and her husband divorced her some two years ago. Her life is now quite empty. Talking to the runners is human contact to her, and also a good change of venue from the familiar faces she hates.

As for the Baron, it works quite well somewhere along the line to let the runners in on the true bizarreness of this guy. C'mon, he rules over a small Eastern European village in his secret mountain fortress. He's into boxing and *fungus*. If this guy doesn't have a green cloak and some power armor hidden away for his battles with the Fantastic Four, I will eat borscht for a month. Allowing the runners to find his name in a Matrix search that comes up with him on the cover of *MycoMan Today* smoking a cigar and detailing his cool fungarium is just way too good an opportunity to miss.

How Can You Not Love A Fight Scene In Zero Gravity?

On the plane ride and the train ride, there are two random combats. You really only need one, and if the game night is short, you don't need either. I'd junk the second one, primarily because of the unique opportunities provided by the first. It disarms the player characters and forces them to fight hand-to-hand in a difficult situation, rewarding the more versatile party members.

That's right, as soon as you entrust your weapons to Global Priority Mail and hop on that flight, there's a blast of smoke and some guys intent on killing you for...well, no real reason, actually. There are some noises in the text about them shadowing you (with no opportunity to spot them) and assuming your Johnson is hiring you for some anti-German action because, well...she's French.

Uh-huh.

Now, when it comes to crimes committed on air vehicles, I am willing to believe in any level of human evil, at any time and for no reason other than that the bastards of the world believe they can get away with it, but that's in the real world, not my game.

Patch #4: Given the two fight scenes, you should really go with whichever one the players are not expecting.

I personally make the hijackers be actual hijackers and not psychos deliberately out to kill the runners. (The PCs will fight, don't worry. Give a shadowrunner a rationale to righteously spank terrorists and they will take it.) If you want to flesh the criminals out once they're being beaten and interrogated, it turns out they're in debt to the Eagle's Union of Destiny policlub and wanted to delay the shuttle's re-entry into the atmosphere, land it in a third-world nation, and sell the shuttle technology to a local syndicate. Most anywhere without a great radar net would do, including central Asia (pick a city from the news...any one I list will be outdated soon enough) or any of the locations in **Cyberpirates**. They got tapped for this particular job because they're the ones with cyberspurs, and the policlub would have used the funds to shield itself from costly lawsuits, including the murder trial of Hildi's older brother Berdy.

The second fight scene, on the train, is pretty ridiculous. Now, I've written some bad-ass buffets in my time, including terrorist attacks, but the majority of them were connected to the plot. Here we've got twelve bad-asses taking over the train when our runners probably have no weapons, and another squad coming in on a panzer in order to battle them. Granted, this sort of death and destruction also happens in war-torn areas, but will someone explain to me why our runners will be inclined to duke it out with any of the gentlemen with assault rifles?

Patch #5: Corrupt cops are bad enough without the panzer. Having these guys shake down the characters to put their papers in order characterizes the countryside quite fine. Sudden changes of laws can be pretty terrifying: confiscation of "pornography" or "subversive material" that would get only an R-rating in the UCAS, detaining anyone with obvious cybernetics, or taking a cellular sample from the magician comes to mind. Be sure to point out that the train is in the valley far downhill from Schloss Munchmaussen, because we're going to have some fun with it later.

Better to Have Loved Than Schlosed

Goldi, the spy for Baron Munchmaussen, checks them into the youth hostel where their equipment waits. Then the runners plan and assault the castle. There's a slight error in their equipment: the H&Ks supposedly have underbarrel grenade launchers, but the core rules say submachine guns aren't supposed to be able to mount them. If you make the grenades hand-use or make the guns Samopal vz88v's, we're good to party. The Maglock Passkeys also have no rating: 5 or so is fine.

The castle is a reasonably tough nut without magical assistance in the form of Shapechange spells, Control Thoughts, or that bane of Shadowrun sessions, a lot of time spent decking. Unfortunately, the handiest hole in the Baron's armor is that he supposedly tells his guards to play dead and lets you in to see if you're there to assassinate him. He then meets you in person.

He meets shadowrunners armed with a missile launcher *in person*.

I realize Trolls suffer from mental retardation, but still...

Patch #6: So there they are, in the Baron's throne room, communicating on unencrypted micro-transceivers...only to hear the frequency jammed. The Baron appears on a nearby television screen.

"Is that all you were looking for, *nicht war?*" you say in your best Bavarian German voice. "I am so deesappointed...you Yankee criminals, all the same, with your privatized medicine and bad cars and supply-side-economics! You think you are James Bond and John Wayne and Nicky Saitoh, well...let us see how you like *thees* game, *Meester Bond!*"

If at all possible, see if you can get him to capture one or two of them, but not all. He'll have them tied up and bellow, "Take them...TO THE FUNGARIUM!"

As he delivers his monologue, play the James Bond theme music in the background.

"What do you know about fungus, Meester Bond?" he asks, not waiting for an answer. "Of course, your UCAS educational system has taught you nothing. The largest form of life on earth, you see, is not a whale or a dragon. It's a colony of fungus. Its life cycle is simple. It spews out its load of spores into the air and each starts to grow in warm, moist places...wherever there is decomposing matter..."

(evil chuckle)

"...and sometimez, it does not vait that long..."

As he speaks, his guards tie them to a metal platform, to be lowered into an almost throbbing pit, full of the Awakened variety of a really big mushroom colony. Anybody who falls in the pit dies of athlete's lung. Maybe the Baron pets a cat. Maybe he's just holding a big shiitake and stroking it.

Anyway, the other player characters kill him and rescue their buddies, right?

Insert Your Taco Bell Slogan Here

The adventure doesn't have a whole lot on the almost-inevitable consequence: the runners won't kill everyone in the place, but make a run for the nearest border with heavily

armed soldiers chasing them. Fortunately, those of us who had childhoods in the 1980s know exactly what to do.

Patch #7: Get out that Bond music again, 'cause it's time to rip off scenes to the left and to the right. Be sure to mention that it's snowing heavily the night of the run. As the runners flee, let's consider how they could do so.

There's the cliff. Not a good plan.

There's the winding mountain road (*For Your Eyes Only*).

There's the cable car with enormous metahuman pursuers (*Moonraker*).

And once they get down to the village itself, by gosh, that snow is so high the cars aren't going anywhere. They have snowshoes, but look! Isn't that a ski resort at the top of the hill next to the extremely long mountainside leading down to the border with the police station where the guards who ripped us off in the name of Baron Eisenstein (who hates Baron Munchmaussen) are having their hot cocoa?

So it is.

If an anti-vehicular missile flips over the runners' getaway car and it slides upside down along the slope of the hill with four shadowrunners yelling "STEER! STEER!" to the troll using a snowshoe as a rudder until they shoot off the ski jump, I don't know where you got the idea.

Fighting on Skis

For combat purposes, I would judge shooting or fighting while skiing to be a miss-fest. Not only is the skier moving at, say, 10 x their Athletics in meters per combat turn (about +2-3 TN if I remember right) any attacker is considered running or walking on Difficult Ground to keep up (+4 to +6 TN, if I remember right). Note the Armed and Unarmed Combat rules for attacking while passing an opponent and add 1/10th the meters per combat turn to the Power Level of any attack. Kicking someone with a ski adds 2 to the target number, has a Reach of 1, and does Str+2/M Stun.

Each round, the skiers must make an Athletics test (target 4 for slope, 5 for crowds, 6 for the woods and 8 for the resort's breakfast table) or else they suffer a wipe-out and resist a wound as per a standard vehicle crash. If the runner isn't using ski poles, add +2 to this target number.

Scenes like this are why everyone should play a physical adept at least once.

"LOVES"

Next up, the runners trash a little two-floor policlub filled with elfy-types and drop off a manuscript page.

Oh, I'm sorry, that was "Hates."

After the nut-fest of "Past," "Loves" is going to feel right back at home, too much so. While the decker gets to see the difference in the Matrix as he activates the viral program, the other members of the team are, well...breaking in and shooting the place up. A few other delivery touches make "Loves" appear the least interesting adventure when actually run, though the text isn't bad.

Mega-Patch: In the long-term pacing game...I admit I haven't tried this... you could probably just skip "Loves" entirely. Drop the manuscript page off in "Spiritual" instead of a datachip, and you're good to go. Make Jane Foster that which he loves and the ritual works fine by ending his "Future" in Harlequin's final sorcerous coup.

We Start "*In Media Res*" Which is Latin for "Railroaded"

The players are in a van driven by a fixer, dropping them off at a party hosted by the Young Elven Technologists. The run is in Puyallup, which is a metahuman-heavy slum thoroughly described in "Present" (adventure #8) to set the mood. Of course, this meant by the time we got to "Present" and my gamemaster was reading the canned text, I raised my hand, saying "How come they didn't describe this a few sessions ago?"

Patch #8: The YET supposedly compete with the APN for recruits ("compete" meaning "outclass" by taking all the real elves while the APN blame their inadequacies on the YET). If so, they're probably based closer than Puyallup. Their techie skills can pay higher rent than that. I'd stick them downtown.

Gettin' the Party Started

Of course, they get scanned at the door for weapons (which no player character will want off their person without bitching, especially after "Past") and those with internal shotguns in their solid metal cyberarms will be asked to wait outside and miss the roleplaying. But that's what the player wanted, now it's what he gets.

Now you've got to keep the feel of a party, which requires you to juggle many characters and locations rapidly. This can be as exhausting or time-consuming as running a large multi-person fight scene. And if you haven't made the APN repulsive but simply read the text by its founder as an example of what they believe, the difference between them and the YET is tiny. They both come off as pro-Elf policlubs, except the YET like web pages and the APN like unicorns. Time to add some detail.

Shadowrun frequently gives out information with a social skill test, such as the negotiation roll for anyone targeted by a YET recruiter working the party. While this is a nice way to help along players who can't always think of something to say, it really sucks when your character doesn't have the dice to do the job, especially when the info is essential to the plot. So let's do it conversationally.

Patch #9: The Young Elven Technologist recruiters working the party will probably soft-sell, which works like so:

1) The cutest member of the opposite sex starts with a few lines designed to get an idea of what the PC likes. Events like a dance in which everyone spreads out, grabs bystanders, and drags them in as part of the fun give an instant topic afterward. If that doesn't work, the recruiter can ask about being shy. Shadowrunners who claim "I'm being professional," get "You're a professional partygoer? You got anything worth paying for?" and some winks. Cheerful relaxation is the order of the day. The party is here to relieve pressure, not cause it.

2) If the PC says something dorky, the recruiter is here to make them feel at home. They laugh as if it were meant to be a joke (or say it reminds them of one -- jokes set up an obligation to be listened to) and then say it's refreshing to hear someone who sounds real when there are so many fake people in the world. From this point, the objective is to keep the conversation rolling by blending with the target until they have a good time. If the flirting falls apart because the runner says "I'm gay," the recruiter launches into how her gay friends happen to be here. If the runner says "I'm a professional killer," the recruiter says "Really? No kidding, I was always curious about that kind of life..." This style of speaking is called "conversational shitwork," and makes many people more comfortable.

3) As noted in the Etiquette tests, recruiters will try to get the PC to come to future events, but this is of secondary importance to getting the PC's phone number, which means they can pester the PC until they give in and come to an event. It's at these events when the "love-bombing" begins: a whole weekend of people paying close attention and letting you feel as if you can say anything to them because they love you unconditionally. And if they can keep you from talking to anyone outside the club for a week or two, it's time for some serious Willpower checks.

An unfortunate side effect (and story) is obvious if the runner appears on security camera (and thus NewsNet) later and his potential squeeze sees it and still has that number in her hand.

Lancelot Windtree

...is pointed out here so he'll be remembered next adventure. He's a racist, arrogant, and bored elf mage without the stats to back it up.

That's the type. I just wanna remind you he's also a character.

Windtree has gotten his sword inside, which to a runner, is a dead give-away that he's got an in with someone powerful. He's also wearing it on his back, which means he's gonna have that back to a wall or else risk someone playfully grabbing it from behind. So he's acting like a wallflower dressed like a convention-goer, staring at everybody and wondering why they're having a better time than he is.

I think Windtree's dark side comes from inadequacy. He grew up in some blue-collar burg as the only child of human parents he hated. He ran off to the Land of Promise...only to discover every elf on the West Coast had, too. He was a transparent frag-up who tried to fit in by human-bashing, never knowing that though it got some results, it distanced him from his peers.

This all changed when he discovered he was magical. It was late in life and during an argument with a particularly screechy girlfriend, he lost it and hit her with the inner manifestation of his intense desire to tell people to shut up. It's his best combat spell: a Sleep at 7. Though he may talk

big about killing folks, it betrays the fact that he really wants to dominate, not kill. Or he used to.

When he heard he was actually genetically superior, no bones about it, the Chosen One fantasy took over. But that, too, was a disappointment. A few hermetic classes and he realized the other mages were smarter and better than he was, and often more socially adept. Eهران the Scribe, on the other hand, being a politician, was careful never to show his disdain. Instead, he told Ariel to train Lancelot as a disposable tool. Giving him the weapon focus sword was part of the plan: through bonding to the sword, he thinks of killing as something that he can do to prove his loyalty to Eهران. This will officially make him a Big Boy, but he's not ready to play with life and death yet. His real danger is through his inexperience, ego, and stupidity. He'll stick a sword in your face even if you can kill him, and if you give him only the spanking he deserves, he'll snipe you later.

De-conditioning Lancelot is really only something to be done once "Counterstroke" is long over. Someone should lock this boy in a DocWagon emergency room and have the bleeding people ask why he doesn't have a healing spell if he's such a good-guy magician. Maybe then he'll realize the world isn't all about him.

If players do what they do best, however, they'll kill this guy and take his 420,000-nuyen sword. If they do, it's always possible to beef him up a bit (a Grade 0 Initiate with Body, Strength, Quickness and Armed Combat at 4 and Increase Reflexes +2 would soup up that underpowered Elf Mage archetype.) But you don't need to keep the magic sword out of their hands to keep them from using or selling it. The counter I would pull to this murder is to have a few detectives track down the characters a la *Law & Order*.

How in the world do they find out where the runners live? Easy. They don't. Windtree's team did. And when they go through the belongings of Samuel Neville, a.k.a. Lancelot Windtree, whose dead body can't pay his rent, they're gonna find a folder.

(KNOCK KNOCK)

"Excuse me, do you know a Mr. Samuel Neville? No? Could you explain why this dossier on you was at his residence shortly before his death? Nice sword there, mister, um...I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name, it just said 'Captain Carnage' on the buzzer...have you seen this troll before? No? That's funny, 'cause there's some ticket records that says you and he were on a shuttle to Germany together...could you tell me where you got that sword? And did you pay with cash or credstick? And if you don't work at the U.S. Mint, Mr. Carnage, why do you normally carry around 420,000 nuyen worth of cash?"

Mr. Johnson

Johnson is supposedly an Elf called Lee Gorbin. Make sure the runners overhear the name, otherwise the real Lee Gorbin showing up and making a ruckus at the door makes absolutely no sense.

The adventure isn't too clear on Mr. Johnson. That is, it's got plenty of canned text to get forth the essentials of the run, but if Johnson "might or might not" be Harlequin in disguise, it's just the tip of the torpedo. The Laughing Man ain't gonna gather together people for an organized chat: it's not his style. But if he were imitating an anal elf named Lee Gorbin, he'd play it to the hilt and have fun with it.

Perhaps that's the reason the Negotiation success rate is so low (\$750 per success, when he obviously has the cash to throw around \$40,000 per head). "Gorbin" is the sort of

guy who will color-code the Skittles at the party table as he talks. He can even arrange them in a pattern like the Battle of Redding.

If anyone ever asks either Gorbin or a contact why the Young Elven Technologists should be framed and have half their members probably get shot, be prepared. How can one argue with a group whose sole purpose is giving poor elves important job skills?

Patch #10: Easy...if those elves never profit from them.

The counter-argument is like so:

"Eهران the Scribe has got it wired with his "elven ideal" rhetoric, and he always has. He denounced racism against elves in 2035 -- like there is any compared to what orks and trolls get -- and used that excuse to destroy a division of the California National Guard. Then he carved out a new police state with (go figure) him at the top. And is the Tir any better than what we get in Seattle? No! It's a monarchy with human rights abuses that never get reported. This guy isn't Gandalf the Grey, he's Slobodan Milosevic with prettier trees in his backyard. He's manipulating the common elf with catchy words like 'freedom' and 'heritage' which sound so much better than 'exploitation.' He gives elves job training...but do you ever see any of the elves leave? Of course not, because they're encouraged to think about 'loyalty' and the 'clean living' and 'Spartan lifestyle' that keep their head 'clear.' What's clear is this: they could be making 45,000, maybe 60,000Y a year somewhere else and here they're doing it for a roof over their heads. That sounds like a network, chummer, the techie arm of Osama Bin Eهران."

The Run, Already

Well, the runners need a decker. Personally, I make the "voice in the party" NPC a decker nine times out of ten. They jack in. They jack out. No delay of game.

If the runners approach before 11:00 PM, they've got to deal with some not-bad opposition: the Elven and Troll street samurai are eggshells armed with hammers (you got less than Willpower 5 in my game, you're a fragging eggshell). After that, you've got a milk run except for the Bodyguard archetype upstairs who can lay on the pain in a narrow hallway. (The first time I played this section, we had a player running a character based on the Bodyguard archetype and both 'borgs slammed each other through drywall like Robocop and the Terminator going head-to-head. Fun scene.) According to the text, apparently the trolls don't sleep here. I say there's no other reason to have 'em around, so let 'em join in the fun.

Because then...no matter what the runners do...halfway through the run there is an explosion and the Association Para Nobilis show up, shooting everyone.

And Now, a Note to All Future Shadowrun Authors:

Being in a crossfire between two or three teams of opponents is not original. It's not all that fun, and it's not such a great ending to a Shadowrun adventure. Runners don't say, "Wow, there were many factions here, that was fascinating." They say "why does this kind of crap always happen to me when I'm trying to get it done as quickly and efficiently as possible and there's nothing I can do to prevent it?"

It can work...but it will only work once.

It's been done in Harlequin, in Native American Nations I, Elven Fire, Super Tuesday, Shadows of the Underworld, Mob War and I really don't feel like getting up from my computer and heading over to the shelf to name all the rest.

Quit it.

..And Back to the Action

The gunfire does drive home the point that the runs are related. But you know, if my PCs, oh, killed every living thing back in "Hates," how come there are a bunch of APN boys still moving over here?

Patch #1: Make sure the poser-elves in "Hates" don't all die. Some of them running away and screaming is perfectly all right. When I need to keep someone alive for just a few action phases longer or even a few rounds, I start whipping out all the rules no one bothers with: bad lighting conditions, target running, knockdown takes him behind the full cover of the wall making it Blind Fire, and so forth. Without rules like these and some healthy visualization, Shadowrun combats do not so much have back-and-forth drama as blow-your-ass-away drama.

"COUNTERSTROKE"

Bar none, this is my all-time favorite Shadowrun adventure, including the ones I wrote. It taught me the entire concept of "herding" players by presenting them with obvious decisions. It's also the adventure that made me realize that the choice of gaming authors for a particular product matter, and Paul Hume gets the official TLP "Attaboy" for his writing. He not only has a little style, he took the time to make the NPCs tough, appropriate, and human.

The heart of Counterstroke is not breaking into a facility, it's breaking out of one.

You, meaning the runners, want to break out, see, 'cause you're being tortured.

Oh...you don't want that? Too bad, 'cause you're gonna get tricked.

You walk into a trap. This happens a fair amount of the time in Shadowrun, but usually you're expected to fight their way out. (Unless it's One Stage Before, in which you are expected to get three 14S sniper rifle rounds through your heads and die pitifully.) See, you try to do a pickup at Natural Vat Food Technologies, but the contact is drugged. The cops and plainclothes agents close in all around you.

Lemme say that again. The two guys in the park playing chess? Secret Service with wired reflexes. The couple making out on a park bench? Ditto. That's mean enough. Then three armored patrol cars dump out nine guys with assault rifles around your getaway vehicle, a fraggin' helicopter comes overhead with a machine-cannon to kill your backup car, a dozen more guys in partial heavy armor and assault rifles spread through the woods while two with light machine guns on gyro-mount harnesses lay down the cover fire. "Gyro-mount," by the way, is a Shadowrun code word meaning "this isn't a combat, it's a combat in which you are expected to die."

Now, when all this shitstorm comes your way and as you scatter, a van pulls up, the back doors open, and this knockout babe screams "Get inside if you want to live!"

And she's the trap.

Problems When Running It

The gas in the van works. Nobody gives a crap about blood filters at character creation. And after a few rounds of resisting 6D Stun, nobody cutting their way out of an armored van is going to be fighting off a Force 8 Air Elemental simultaneously.

Pretty much everything in the "By The Beautiful Sea" subsection also works the way it's supposed to. The cell is pretty secure, and since the mages are drugged to the eyeballs, 90% of escape plans go out the window right there. Everybody gets to sit buck naked in a cell while one of them at a time is dragged off to be tortured.

This bonds runners together like no other adventure.

Now, Iggy the troll is written in to assist escape attempts, but I'd lay off on him for independent-minded shadowrunners who want to bust out without any help. On the other hand, my own team sat there like cooperative lumps even with a possible escape method. We didn't look for a way out: when the GM read the description, we assumed the guards were attentive once and they would stay attentive. The suggested electric engineering trick was the last thing on our minds.

If you want the runners to try an escape attempt, you need to give them the will to escape, which means letting them know how many guards there are, which ones don't

like each other, and when they do little things like rub their eyes.

The only problem with "Counterstroke" is that it takes a long time to run. Three runners tortured for one scene each is quite a while. Multiple tortures will take forever.

Patch #12: Two gamemasters would be ideal here; if not, take runners in pairs if the night is getting long, or be sure to take the player with the best memory first so he can tell the others "it doesn't matter if you tell them everything, they'll torture you anyway."

The Lucky and Prepared Twiddle Their Thumbs

If a runner or two gets away in the initial firefight and tries to find his buddies, you have a timing problem. How to balance their search while your mind is on the torture sessions?

Our escapee had a Turn to Mist spell he managed to cast on himself and one other player to get past the guns. But our escapees couldn't investigate very well. They tried to call Mr. Johnson over and over, and didn't search any datastores because, well...they weren't deckers. You too may have to give a severe helping hand to get escapees to find the bungalow.

Patch #13: There is a suggestion in the text that runners might turn to the authorities for help. I'd actually go so far as to have the FBI knock on their door because the NatVat security-cams mounted in the front of the cop cars nailed them at the scene. They get a few questions, then some forthcoming revelation. NatVat doesn't want to nail the runners, it wants to nail Mr. Johnson. The FBI doesn't want to nail the runners, it wants to nail the folks who stole the knockout van from the CIA. So the FBI hands over the location of the bungalow and denies all knowledge of their actions.

Time this so just before the guys on the inside are breaking out, the guys on the outside are breaking in. Give the outside team a fuzzy map of the bungalow (i.e. "cliff," "doors," "you've seen one person inside") and tell them to plan while you roleplay. With little else to amuse themselves, they'll come up with a bunch of fallback plans, too.

Hunting Down Doctor What

Doctor What is the runners' torturer.

They will want this man dead.

If he gets away, the adventure suggests he buys his protection from some powerful yakuza. Personally, I think the best way to bring this guy back is to have the contacts of the runners shake their heads and say "geez, the man is like a ghost, we have no idea where he is, the Michigunso-gumi or whomever aren't talking, life sucks."

Then, at the beginning of some other run, when everybody is getting together to talk biz, you mention the traffic is thick today...and at a stoplight in Renton or some drek, while the car is still in "drive," you casually mention that Doctor What crosses the street in front of them, carrying groceries. Nature will take its course.

The other, more character-centered option, I offer under "Present."

"SPIRITUAL"

Ah, the quintessential shadowrun. If there were ever a run that screams "rich guys playing a game," it's sending you to South America to attack a lightly fortified compound in the jungle...and bring back a flower.

The first bug is that the plan includes flying out of there. The Mr. Johnson, Anson Helm, provides a Winged Planes skillsoft. You know what? Not everybody's got skillwires, and them that don't probably don't have Winged Planes, either. Of course, Helm could point out that the plane has an autopilot and in the next day or two, he can arrange some flight-sim training to give the runners some familiarity with it.

The traveling is pretty straightforward. The Jivaro tribe does bug me a little: they're much more out of the pulp adventure tradition than a realistic portrayal of native low-tech South Americans. Not that this is forbidden in game design, but the adventure doesn't give me any signs that it knows the difference ("Deceitful nature?" Come on...). I'd add a few lines here saying "Yeah, they used to be assimilated, then the Awakening made trees overtake their land and they figured what the hell, hunt and gather. Within a generation of listening to the shamans go on about magic, it was back to headhunting."

The Facility

The target is an airstrip and a greenhouse in the middle of the jungle. There's not even a gate in the electric fence. No one goes in except by air. (How a plane lands on an airstrip 80 meters long...well, I guess the map isn't really to scale.)

The only way to fake your way into this one is through magic, or through finding out where the plane goes and replacing the mail delivery personnel at the other end... in a little Ecuadoran town where there is practically no security. This option should be encouraged, because acting "in-character" allows a runner a greater time for reconnaissance and learning the connections of the metaplot. A runner jumping the fence is never gonna bother taking a look-see at the nifty painting in the mansion, let alone think, "Hey! It looks like Ariel!"

Unless someone hits a merc with that lovely plot-killer, Control Thoughts, and tells him to go get the stupid flower and huck it over the fence, this is going to be a quiet-in, noisy-out. The mercenaries are dangerous bastiches, and the barghest, concealed in living material, is a wicked surprise. If you still want to drag them into the plot connection, mention there is a lot of affection or even love attached to the Ariel painting.

Much is made in the text of why the runners should take the Hughes Stallion helicopter gunship rather than the Cessna plane as they are fleeing. This would be a nice plot bit except for the fact that the Cessna still goes a lot faster than the Stallion and in the time it takes the chopper to warm up its rotors or point its guns at the Cessna (it has to get around a building right now) the plane will be out of machine-gun range.

Patch #14: Stick missiles on the Stallion, or make it a panzer. For all the fiction about how cool panzers are, there are absolutely no published adventures where you can end up flying your own. It'd be cool to have them be the terror of Amazonia for the next 375 kilometers and then realize there's no place to get jet fuel.

And gosh, that flower is gonna be wilting outside of a greenhouse.

Gettin' Out

The Jivaro shaman conjures a Storm spirit. How he does this after the runners fill him with lead earlier, I don't really know.

Actually, I do. He summoned it and when they filled him with lead, it went Free. Now it's waiting for them to enter into its Domain, before which it believed it could not have affected them since it's only a few hours old and not used to its new freedom.

Man...somebody thank Paul Hume for writing The Grimoire.

Bump the sucker's Force up to something scary (6 or more, 8 if there's more than one mage) and have fun describing the monsoon. Nothing quite like shorting out your radar and killing all visuals for an untrained pilot to make runners nervous.

"FUTURE"

All in all, this one runs pretty well. I'm just calling attention to the holes.

As soon as the runners get back, a new Mr. Johnson says they have to go. This is not much of a problem: the runners are offered large sums of money and are no doubt curious about what this all means. While it makes sense that Harlequin wouldn't accept his game being interrupted and may even kidnap the runners to get them to finish it, try to avoid this if at all possible. Having runners hate Harlequin, whom they cannot possibly defeat, just makes for future misery.

Of course, this wasn't what annoyed my gaming group when we first played it. What got to us was the canned text. In typical Shadowrun style, it assumes you went home after the last run and immediately got drunk. None of our characters drank, especially before the previous assignment was over. Telling players what their characters do and think in a game of unparalleled personal freedom is quite alienating.

(Yes, I realize there's a paragraph in "Excelsior" doing exactly that. The editors added it.)

Patch #15: Canned text is rarely written well enough to be read word-for-word. The essence is what you need. If it says "the phone shrills loudly, piercing through the haze of sleep until you decide to answer it," don't fall in love with the language. Just make an annoying phone noise at the players until one of them says, "Hello?"

Did These Guys Write Government Manuals, Too?

"The Tacoma Style is a fashionable restaurant and bar that does not permit patrons to enter with any type of weapons. Light handguns are, of course, allowed for personal protection."

Well, that makes sense.

Patch #16: The waiters carry guns. The patrons don't. Mr. Johnson has a gun because he's a mage with Control Thoughts who told the maitre d' that these weren't the guns he was looking for, and he could go about his business.

Even though stats are given for the waiters in case the runners try something on Mr. Johnson, but there's a distinct lack of info on what happens if gun-less runners kick the ass of everyone in the restaurant and make Mister Johnson their bitch. (Two well-designed mages could do this easily.) So let's make up stuff about him.

Mr. Johnson is Chalmer Hamden, an independent agent who got his chops working for a subdivision of Renraku. Due to a somewhat frightening adolescence and early adulthood, he thought it best to keep his magical nature secret (he's a sorcery adept). Rather than be drafted to work in security, Chalmer just Quickened a few detection spells and kept some mental manipulation ones in reserve. After all, if you know what your rivals think, and can convert your enemies, you're far ahead of the game. The only sign of trouble at work is his frequent afternoon naps or stims to take off the Drain of the spells. But he's good at getting things done -- a little Increase Charisma spell never hurts.

Chalmer knows some folks all over, much like a fixer, but his business is about 70% legitimate and 30% shady. He's just the guy who arranges the plane flights because he knows people at Delta Airlines. He was alerted to the job

and the drop-off by a phone call from Eulalie Fortier saying she needed someone new to contact a certain team of runners as soon as possible. Some kind of "development deal" had to be "rewritten." If further pressed, it means in fixer-speak that there's competition moving on this one and the runners have to be in place as soon as possible because people are dead and the assignment is playing catch-up.

Chalmer is married, has two kids, and doesn't ask a lot of questions. His doctor says they're bad for his heart.

Lots of Laser Tag, I Guess?

Our first investigation run gives a pleasantly different feel than the others. It's some easy Perception tests to get the runners on the right trail. The only odd point is when the senior software VP of CommTech is given stats as per the "Company Man" contact, but hey, all those dot-com startup veeps have Firearms 7.

Patch #17: The Media Producer contact has more appropriate stats.

Attack of the Clown Cab

The next few chapters work pretty well and the statistics are pretty appropriate. Pathetic, but appropriate. No one in town is a serious challenge for our heroes, because they're not professionals at this, and the folks who are professionals were dumb enough to let Jane Foster get away. Think of the guys from Fargo and give them Missouri accents (sort of half-Southern and half-Midwestern) and the runners can get a clear picture of who they're up against.

A context error: the hit squad slams into your car with theirs, a Eurocar Westwind. Evidently they bent space and time to fit four guys into what is basically the 2050 equivalent of a Corvette.

Patch #18: Make it a big black Lincoln with stats like a Toyota Elite.

Me Kidnapper, You Jane

The runners hustle Jane Foster onto the plane and take off. Frosty is a middle-America success story -- got herself out of the orphanage circuit, stayed out of jail despite the fact her friends are in a gang, put herself through state school, and is now working at CommTech. She's smart and take-charge, and the reason she's a secretary is mostly inertia. She likes her co-workers, does her job well, hangs out with her friends, and isn't really inclined to aim very high or very far. Kinda like Sarah Connor back when she was working as a waitress, or for those of you under twenty, Erin Brockovitch.

Then a bunch of thugs come after her for no reason she can possibly fathom other than that the world is evil. She gets away from them...and another pack show up. So it's understandable she doesn't want to speak to the runners. But if she doesn't say a word, she's just another playing piece.

Patch #19: I'd make her at least ask for a cigarette. ("Even condemned people are supposed to get one, you know.") By the way, the cigarettes never make her so much as cough. Though she doesn't really know why, she's immune to Pathogens, Poisons, and Age, as is later revealed in Harlequin's Back.

Jane will probably assume the runners are psychopaths and tell them so, which can get them into a lively chat about whether or not they should let her go. ("No, no, a psychopath kills people for no reason, I kill people for money! That didn't come out right...")

"PRESENT"

The runners head into a lot of ash in Puyallup and up a lot of stairs to the sounds of a steel guitar, and it is not a bad idea to bring out music to set the mood. The runners are finally going to meet the man himself, and there are a few things I'd like to say about Harlequin.

As pointed out in the sequel, Harlequin has no stats due to the "First Axiom of Roleplaying Games." Give it statistics and the players will kill it, regardless of how tough it's supposed to be.

I have found this axiom utterly and completely true. The first time we ran into a dragon in *Bottled Demon*, the GM had to fudge four or five times in a row to keep the thing alive, and we were just using pistols and submachine guns. The last time I gamemastered *Mirror, Mirror*, the first move was a spear through the villain for 50 points of damage. And there's one GM I've met at *Origins* whose team had a nuclear bomb from a previous home-campaign adventure and said they were detonating it as soon as they saw Harlequin. He was quite insistent that there was no way Harlequin would have developed a Detect Nuclear Material spell as the trigger for an Anchored teleportation. (My argument was that after watching humans for 7,000 years, Harlequin would have developed that spell around, oh, 1945.)

So Harlequin has no stats.

When I actually rolled dice for him in the sequel, I had him chuck a Force 12 Power Bolt (7S drain) and figured his Magic Pool around 20, with his double-digit Initiatory grade left over for any Shielding he might do. It worked out pretty well. Shielding means powerful mages can't hurt one another with spells, and since any real hard-core mage will have an anti-bullet barrier, they often resort to Highlander-style sword duels to settle matters, as we will see...

Roleplaying Harlequin

Frenetic, chaotic, extremely smart, and pretty damn funny. He's not insane by any means: he just thumbs his nose at any sort of authority and his thoughts are so fast it's hard to keep up. There's two roads you can take when you live as long as he does; one of them is to realize the soul-crushing frustration of life and the other is to laugh at it.

Harlequin is not pretentious the way "Q" is on *Star Trek*. If that happens, he'll come off as an evil villain giving a long-winded speech, and the runners will want to cut him short with a bullet, and they'll be frustrated the whole time they're in his presence. A closer media reference would be if you cross-bred President Bartlet from *The West Wing* and Spike from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, put him on amphetamines and gave him Q's power. Harlequin is intimidating because he's the sort of person who has every stat higher than yours, but because his Charisma is also high, he's pretty cool about it. He knows every rule he's breaking, and while he can't anticipate everything the PCs do, he can anticipate everything important.

So be prepared to show this.

If a runner says, "What? You're this incredibly powerful being, and this is all some kind of sick game? People got killed because of you!" they're wrong. Yeah, chal'han is a game, but it's an important one. It's a way of enacting symbolic revenge because killing Ebran is not worth it when he may be a useful ally against greater dangers. The runners

understand revenge, don't they? If someone hurt the runners, tortured them, cut their ears off, what would they do? Take the high road?

If they sanctimoniously say "yes," have Harlequin suggest they walk through the east door. On the other side of the door is Doctor What...tied up to a chair.

"Prove it," Harlequin says. "I'll let the two of you alone for a while. Oh, there's a pizza guy coming in a few minutes, so if you hear him knock, try to keep the noise down."

Slam.

Just when they start to make a soul-churning decision, the door opens again. "Do you like pepperoni or what? No, no, I'll handle the tip."

Slam.

On with the ritual.

Crack. Fizzle. Boom. Something's wrong, and Harlequin picks up Jane Foster, whom he probably didn't intend to get hurt. ([rant, rant, rant, sudden pause] "Well. Guess I'm looking like the great immortal dork here. One of you wanna help her?")

I personally think after the line "If you do not do as I say, I will hunt you to the ends of the earth and you will suffer pain the likes of which this civilization has never dreamed," you should consider having him pick Jane up and add "Buh-bye!" in a cheery tone. But only if they believe the first sentence completely.

Has Your Luggage Been Out of Your Control Since You Packed It?

The run through the Salish-Sidhe territory is an annoying hassle before the interesting part, which is Althain. The last thing we need right now is a border crossing fight. It also has the line "Unless the runners are extraordinarily clever, the border guards will discover any weapons greater than light pistol size."

Patch #20: I don't know what is up with the light pistol mystique, but there are some very nice Concealability rules in the main book, and the dice ratings for weapon-detector wands in the back of this supplement. As long as the runners have a clean, fake SIN, there really should be little problem.

This is an opportunity for a set-up and a call-back, just in case. Have there be a Salish-Sidhe guard who's not gonna put on the pressure that he's gonna find out anything...but he puts on the pressure because the end of the world is coming and this guy is picking his nose. Talk...real...slow.

"Could I see your driver's license, please?" "Have any strangers asked you to transport anything across the border?" "Do you know all the person-ajez in this vehicle?" "Could you fill out this form regarding whether or not you are bringing over any fresh fruit, live animals, or infective agents?" "Are any of you harboring any viruses?"

Whether they blast through him or not, remember him for later.

The Pressure Is Mountain

So they walk into this active volcano, see.

This is the end of eight adventures. Make it count.

It's the atmosphere you want to get across: the thick natural forests of the Pacific Northwest and the immense magical discharge leaking from the mountain, like astral gas. The cave is disturbingly cold and hot (caves tend to be about 50 degrees Fahrenheit or less, but the waves of geothermal energy brought up by Eهران's spells will give washes of 80 or more) and the river of glowing molten stone should be a sign that they are officially In Some Deep Drek.

Now get your hands on the soundtrack to Terminator 2 and play it in the background. Start roleplaying by candlelight and flashlight. As they start going over the river of molten stone and making Athletics tests, play some sound effects CDs that have gorillas grunting or tigers growling. Don't have them make Perception tests -- make the players swing around flashlights and unless someone aims one at the ceiling, the Embracer is gonna have a hefty bonus to its Initiative.

Remember, this thing looks like a nine-foot version of Satan with claws that can dig through rock.

I Never Thought I'd Say This, But The NPCs Are Too Smart

Eهران's servants at Althain are munchkins: awakened monkeys. But they speak. The Embracer I can handle -- Eهران certainly has a Control Animals spell -- but these little bastards aren't supposed to have language. If they do, it's a major scientific discovery and the U.N. is gonna have to declare them sentient.

So don't make them munchkins. Make them something that the players have never seen or heard of before. Spirits, sprites, lizard-people, rock-people, or little gray aliens -- intelligent ooze wearing a waistcoat that might or might not be a water elemental or an Undine would certainly creep me out. They should fit in with the extreme luxury of the place -- the macroplast audio suite and the other reception room in medieval style should get across the double lives Eهران has been leading.

The Ending Choreography

Why spoil this for the non-reader by describing it here? Go get the book already and read along.

It's a spectacular duel on top of a big, confusing mess. Three teams, two duelists, and a dragon crashes through. Why? I guess a pie fight seemed too mundane.

Before the major conflict, decide whether or not you want to have the dragon-eruption. Dragons litter FASA products and quite a few other roleplaying game lines, so this one may be unnecessary to get across the wonder of the place. If the runners don't find the workroom where said lizard lies, it's gonna come off as a bizarre *deus ex machina* without a few lines by the rapidly fencing Eهران and Harlequin to acknowledge that this is just the kind of crap powerful beings deal with every day. ("Finally let him out of the doghouse?" "Just making room for new tenants.") Fudging and letting the heroes find the secret workroom is probably a good move.

Then comes the parts which my GM cut through quickly. Harlequin screams, thinking he's accidentally killed Eهران, and assumes the incoming Elves are Eهران's goons, and he doesn't have time to be troubled by them.

But it should be made explicitly clear that the elves from Tir Tairngire are not Eهران's at all. They're neutral observers sent by Lugh Surehand. Allaech, in fact, should think the runners are Eهران's goons. Read these lines:

"Servants of Eهران the Scribe: by the orders given to me by High Prince Lugh Surehand of the Land of Promise, you

are not to interfere with our duties. Your master, Eهران, is responding to an unsanctioned challenge with a person foreign to our state..."

I call attention to this because there is all of one sentence notifying the GM that there should be a third crew of Eهران's real goons who want to waste you for being here. Halfway through the fight with the Tir elves, these guys kick in the doors and both runners and elves team up against these even-worse opponents, a fight scene tradition well grounded in a stack of X-Men comics. Afterwards, Allaech gets his chance to rant and rave like a misguided villain.

But Shadowrun's combat system does not promote X-Men-style fights. What it looks like if you enforce the rules is Reservoir Dogs with spells.

If a gunfight breaks out in an empty hall with no cover, "halfway through" does not exist. Ever. Them's with the highest Initiative start killing, and it doesn't stop. The fact that the floor erupts with an angry Dragon? Well heck, that's why you get two Simple Actions...one burst for the elf, one for the dragon, and this is my best day ever!

So when a fight breaks out, have it be in the main hall, where there's artwork and marble columns and fountains to hide behind. It's not a bad idea to hook the Elves up with better spells such as good Force 5 Anti-Bullet Barriers. (PING PING PING..."Get them!") Then out come the melee weapons, and these elves know how to use 'em. Give Allaech a pair of butterfly swords and Two-Weapon Fighting 4 (i.e. 10 dice plus Combat Pool up to 4 out of his 8 each attack...if you're feeling evil, Dikote the suckers), Almsir a stun baton (8S Stun plus disorientation), make Sruth a Grade 2 physical adept with Unarmed 6, 4 extra dice from Increased Ability, 2 levels of Increased Reflexes, and Distance Strike for serious bad-ass kung fu. Taelech can play with his combat axe.

With Almsir Shielding them, you should have at least a round of superheroics. The melee combat's counterattacking system allows there to be a lot more suspense in the contested rolls. It also means the runners can buy time by moving away. If the runners are okay with melee combat, they'll dig this scene. If they aren't, that's when Eهران's goons show up...these huge seven-foot Elf-converted Bodyguard archetypes with Muscle Augmentation and Pain Editors and Partial Heavy Armor. One of them is crushing a wax egg in his hand as a habit. All of them have matte-black cybereyes.

"Allaech," he says with a heavy Elven accent. "Come ova here."

(CLACK of Ingram smartgun.)

"I must break you."

The poor elves look at the runners, and the Initiative dice come out.

If you're still up for the Dragon while these guys are beating the crap out of one another in the fountain and the munchkins (or whatever) are screaming and hurling champagne and strawberries, the Dragon should throw this all to hell. This thing isn't a wimpy-ass tyrannosaurus. Shadowrunners can waste a tyrannosaurus. This thing is Godzilla: the columns break, the marble fountain that must weigh two tons gets knocked into the air and comes down according to the Grenade Scatter chart for at least a good 8D impact damage, and the dragon's ponderous ass cuts off one side of the room from the other. It changes the landscape of the fight scene. And woe betide anyone who was directly over the thing: Athletics or Quickness tests are necessary to avoid falling and hanging onto its stegosaur-plates and horns, whacking it on one side of the head to point its flaming breath over at the elf goons, whose clips of

explosive ammo for their submachine guns burst like firecracker strings...and the PC drives the sword into its eye, bypassing its hardened armor...

Well, that's the idea. A scene with bang.

Then, the deadly duel commences, our exhausted heroes watch...and after both the elves vanish, the rumble begins...Mount Saint Helens is going to erupt.

Closing It All Up

Whether or not they can get out under their own power, this is the moment where the heroes run until they can't take any more. Volcanic gas is everywhere, they're suffering from adrenaline shock, they're trying to run during an earthquake, Athletics and Quickness tests are everywhere, and then...

"Hey! Anyone there?"

The Salish-Sidhe border patrol, looking for hikers caught in the mountain, has Medevac choppers everywhere, trying to account for everyone who came over the border in the last few hours.

On to the stretchers they go. Choppa choppa choppa choppa.

It seems there was some kind of argument whether or not the last chopper would go or stay. "But this one guard seemed insistent, there was all this paperwork filled out saying you were out here, so we kept looking..."

Brief pause.

"Did you guys see anything interesting?"