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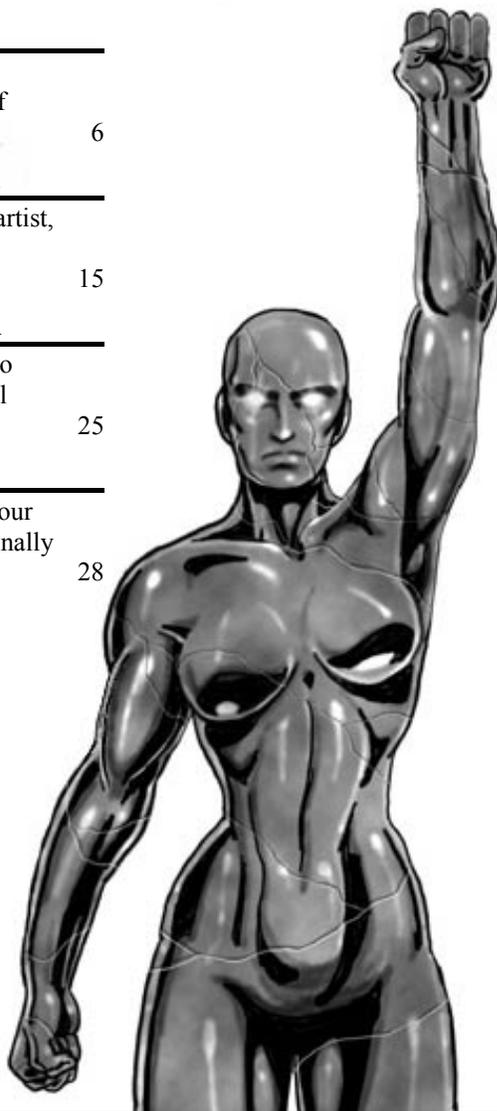
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DIGITAL HERO

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MODERN WAR ON HORSEBACK

“If ever there was a mismatched blend of the modern and medieval in warfare, it is in Afghanistan, where billion-dollar B-2s bomb old Taliban tanks, and mounted fighters of the northern alliance go at the gallop.

“As vaguely described by Pentagon officials, rebels have been seen ‘riding horseback into combat against tanks and armored personnel carriers,’ their horses fed and watered with U.S. help.

“These folks are aggressive,” said General Peter Pace....

— Associated Press,
Nov. 8 2001

CROWDED HIGHWAYS

“I paint (if I may say so) a vivid picture of the Freedom we all Feel, the joy that comes with the eventual mastery of the spirited machine, the sun-soaked run to glory that is Motoring on Two Wheels. Here’s what I say.

“I say: Things are gonna happen that’ll scare you and piss you off. They happen because car people are clueless, careless, angry, impaired, or all of the above. Let those things go. Once they’re over, they’re over.

“See, things don’t always happen one at a time. While you’re

Biker Hero

by Jason Walters

The Mounted Warrior

According to Jared Diamond’s monumental work *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, mankind first domesticated the horse around 4000 B.C. This radical new innovation provided man with an ideal animal companion, one able to transport him over long distances, haul his goods, pull his plows, to act as a platform for his military activity in the form of the Mounted Warrior – or, if necessary, to be used as a source of food. Yet, although the horse is undoubtedly useful in all of these respects, it is in the areas of rapid transportation and military conquest that it has had its greatest impact on the course of human history. Indeed, those bands, tribes, and eventually civilizations which possessed and mastered the “technology” of the horse were invariably able to conquer and dominate those around them who did not. So effective was the Mounted Warrior when used against riderless opponents – no matter how brave, cultured, or organized – that history shows us numerous examples of relatively advanced civilizations, who either lacked mounted warriors or a tradition of skilled horsemanship being felled by those who possessed this important innovation. Attila the Hun and his light cavalry sacked the Western Roman Empire in 452 by springs to mind, and a handful of mounted Spanish adventurers destroyed of the impressive and highly militarily competent Incan Empire in 1531.

Incredibly, it was not until the first World War of the 20th Century that rapid advancement in both automatic weaponry and the internal combustion engine removed the horse from the theater of war – and perhaps then only temporarily. In Afghanistan following the September 11th destruction of the World Trade Center buildings, events which are generally considered to be the first significant military conflict of this Century, the then-rebel Northern Alliance successfully used a massed cavalry charge against a small squad of old Soviet-era tanks manned by Taliban soldiers. Thus, whenever and wherever the relatively new technologies of internal combustion and automatic weaponry are not available or not supplied by a modern manufacturing-based society, our companion the horse seems ready, even in this age of smart-weapons and space flight, to step in as if he had never left us... or, more appropriately, as if we had never left him.

In light of all of this history it is not surprising that the image of the proud, independent mounted warrior has remained firmly lodged in the collective conscious of Eurasian man – a sort of cultural animus,

unimpressed by the passage of time. After all, it was the Mounted Warrior who was responsible for the shaping and spreading of what we now think of as Western Culture through his travel and conquest. He has been with us as long as we have built roads, constructed buildings, and recorded our language in written form. Vital, robust, individualistic, and energetic, he calls to us through the haze of our comfortable modern mediocrity. He has little interest in television or computer games or shopping at the mall. He has little use for our complicated laws, customs, and ideas of proper behavior. From across the mists of time he beckons to us, barbaric and alluring, whispering words of wanderlust and freedom.

Frightening to many, irresistible to others, the Mounted Warrior has managed to incarnate himself through a new breed of disciples clad this time not in chain-mail but in leather and kevlar, not on horseback but upon the many and various forms of the vehicle known as the “motorcycle.” It is this disciple, this new incarnation of Mounted Warrior, which we now call The Biker – a maligned archetype who has enjoyed a long, if not terribly distinguished, career in the world of roleplaying games. Unlike his great-grandfather The Knight, The Biker is seldom portrayed in a noble or heroic light. He is often little more than a nameless thug, usually the lackey of some far more qualified and interesting villain, inserted into a game so that the sidekicks and other less powerful characters have someone to kick around while the real heroes are busy saving The World from Evil or The City from Peril or the little old lady from purse snatching... or whatever.

Well, friends and fellow gamers, no longer.

Although many “superhero” roleplaying games have sported motorcycle-riding characters in their long and colorful histories, the vast majority of them are but very minor villains – so many in fact that it seems that no fledgling modern day “superhero” could possibly begin his or her career without taking on a bunch of “bikers” in some sort of street fight scene. By and large, this concept of SpandexMan vs. Evil Biker Hoodlums has been borrowed by game creators and their players from the very comic books which inspire the entire genre of super-heroic roleplaying games. If you think about it, for a long time now it’s been an accepted norm in the world of comic book writing that you simply aren’t a martial-arts-hero-dark-avenger-guy unless you wade your way through at least two “biker gangs” a year – or maybe more if you are feeling particularly peckish. A sidekick just

artwork by Ron Salas

Crucible

 by W. Jason Allen

Background/History: Thanks to natural talent and her father's financial support, it only took Felicity Larkin a couple of years to become known for her fine jewelry. Her attention to detail and exquisite craftsmanship made her pieces highly desirable amongst the wealthy. She worked hard to produce as much as she could, refusing to bow to popular consumerism and allow mass production of her designs. This kept her pieces rare, in demand, and highly valuable. Her financial future seemed secure.

Occasionally, Felicity would accept custom commissions. One of her regular customers, a well-to-do business man from Vibora Bay, brought an old family heirloom to be reworked with new gold, as the original gold workings were tarnished and of poor aesthetic design. The piece appeared to be a large opal, bound with interlocking bands of a dark, almost copper-colored gold. What was unusual about the bands was the engravings on them. They looked like flowing scrollwork, but the lines were broken up at odd intervals, making for a very strange pattern. Felicity could see why her customer wanted the gold removed and redone; the bands were not pretty at all.

As Felicity attempted to heat the gold enough to remove the bands, using a solder so as to not damage the opal, an odd feeling passed over her, like the creepy feeling one gets when standing in a graveyard at night. She shrugged it off and continued working. The gold wasn't melting at the proper temperature, so she increased the heat. The first gold band parted – and exploded.

Felicity was thrown back into the wall, dazed. When she managed to clear her head, she realized her workshop was all but ruined. Surprised to find herself alive, she wondered what had caused such an explosion. Then she saw *it*. Where the opal had been was now a small vortex of energy, swirling silently in mid-air. A dark, shadowy form hovered on the other side of the room, apparently disoriented and confused. Felicity began to flee the room in fear, but it was too late. Two tendrils of energy lashed out from the vortex to strike both Felicity and the shadow. Felicity screamed, and passed out.

When she awoke, the Felicity that had been was no more. She knew now that the opal had not been bound with gold, but with orichalcum, a rare and magical metal. The opal was an ancient device once used to bind humans with creatures from the Netherworld. Of Felicity and the shadow creature, it had made a creature filled with the desire to corrupt and destroy the innocent, with several demonic powers. Their

minds were now one, and completely given to darkness. Calling herself Crucible, she began her nightly reign of terror.

Personality/Motivation: Where Felicity was once kind, if vain and aristocratic, she is now cruel and sadistic. She conceals her personality change, but it is becoming more difficult with time. Her mind and body have been merged with a dark spirit from the Netherworld, turning her into a creature similar to a succubus. Crucible thrills in corrupting people, whether by directly controlling them or by manipulating them into doing what she wants. She feeds on their pain and internal conflict. Then when she has tired of them, she feeds on their life force.

Crucible thinks nothing of causing pain to others for her own amusement. She will play practical jokes of the most horrid kind, just to watch people cringe. Why not? Humanity is not worthy of consideration. They are weak, pathetic creatures with no reason to be alive other than to amuse her. But, when someone stands up to defend themselves or others against her, she strikes swiftly and without mercy, draining their life away and tossing them aside like garbage.

Crucible is cold and condescending, certain of her superiority and success. Her ultimate goal is the fulfillment of her every whim and pleasure, both physical and emotional.

Quote: “Come here, darling, I have something to show you....”

Powers/Tactics: The merging granted Crucible several demonic powers, some of which simulate the powers of a succubus. Bat-like wings allow her to fly. She can become a cloud of mist, slipping into the tightest of secured areas. Her touch drains away life essence and she can throw a lance of flame. Screaming souls from the Netherworld obey her will, flying about a target to prevent movement. With a sword of spectral flame she can severely injure even intangible targets. She can even take control of a person's mind and manipulate them directly.

Crucible prefers to attack from surprise or ambush, but will fight in the open if there is no other choice. She preys on those who think highly of themselves, such as the rich or powerful, but will gladly victimize anyone. Her most favored targets are flashy, well-known superheroes.

Crucible's powers and enhanced characteristics only apply in her demonic form.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to thank Melissa DePlanche for her gracious permission in allowing me to mutilate her heroic character into the villainess presented herein. All mistakes are, naturally, my own.

CRUCIBLE PLOT SEEDS

Crucible decides one of the PCs (male or female, she doesn't care which) is absolutely fascinating, and pursues her target relentlessly, even obsessively. Rejection will certainly have unfortunate consequences for the PC and the local population....

A lone PC interrupts her weekly 'feeding' and becomes the substitute entrée. Please pass the salt.

The merging between Felicity and the Netherworld entity deepens, eradicating the last remnant of her humanity. Abandoning her identity as Felicity, Crucible enters a feeding frenzy, killing many before the PCs are brought in to stop her. Is this the natural end result of the accident that gave her powers, or is something – or someone – else causing this transformation?