

# Shadow Runners

Illustration by Jonathan Brown

By Paul Cherry

When I saw the troll, I was sure I had the right team for the job. He was just over nine feet tall and had a build that showed where extra muscle tissue had been implanted. Just looking at him helped me to understand the Humanis Policlub's opinion that metahumans were monsters. It's not as if these guys loaded up with cyberware look all that human anymore. The rest of the team, except the orc that was trying to hide heavy armor under a duster, fit in a lot better. There was an elf, all in blue, that could easily have been a high class "joygirl", two humans, an American Indian (with his face painted half red and half white), and a girl in grease-stained overalls. There was also a dwarf that gave me the sudden urge to leave. I don't know if it was his grin, or the gleam in his eye, but I got the feeling that he wanted to eat me. It didn't help that we were in an abandoned part of the Renton Barrrens. The Barrrens have a lot of ruined buildings around that could hide my remains. I was glad all they had was a beat up GMC Hovertruck because if I had to, I could always duck into my limo and beat feet.

The dwarf spoke up. "So Mr. Johnson, whatavaya got for us?"

"A simple information run with a few twists."

"Twists?"

"I need you to get some information for me and I need to go along."

"Who're we hitting?"

"Ares Macrotechnologies."

"That'll cost extra."

"200,000 Nuyen cover it?"

"And expenses."

"Fine. Introduce your team."

"I'm Swiss, The big guy's Target, the orc's Flax, the babe's Sapphire, the grease monkey's Wheels, and the Amer-Ind is Jester. We all know you, the ambiguous Mr. J., our contact with our real employers. Who is it this time? Azzies, Renraku, or is it just one of those little corps that could be controlled by anyone?"

"I've got the floor plan, details on their security, badges that identify us as employees from a flower shop they do business with, a file number for the info I'm after, and plates for your...vehicle."

"Let's see the plans," said Jester.

I set the plans, badges, suits, and magnetic sign on an overturned crate and let them go over the information.

Flax said, "I don't believe the security on this place. Chemical sniffers that could catch the smell of a bullet at five meters."

Wheels said, "Look at this, pop-down remote gun turrets in the ceiling."

Target said, "At least, their guard patrols are at set times."

Jester said, "If the Info is right."

I spoke up, "The Info's chip truth."

"Yeah, we've heard that one before,"

Target said sarcastically.

Sapphire asked, "What's the Ice situation in the info dump?"

"Non-existent."

"Why is that?", Jester asked.

"They figure that if they can protect the site physically, and it isn't connected to the matrix, they don't need Intrusive Countermeasures on the system. You can see on the map the path I planned on us taking. Any problems?"

Flax said, "No problems. As soon as we finish some biz we'll be ready to go."

"What business?"

"Air-tight boxes for the guns."

"You won't need guns. Even if things go wrong the magic users can blast them while the two of you take care of anyone coming into melee range."

"And our magic will do a lot of good against armored sec vehicles," Jester said.

"Look, there will be no problems."

"Famous last words," Target said.

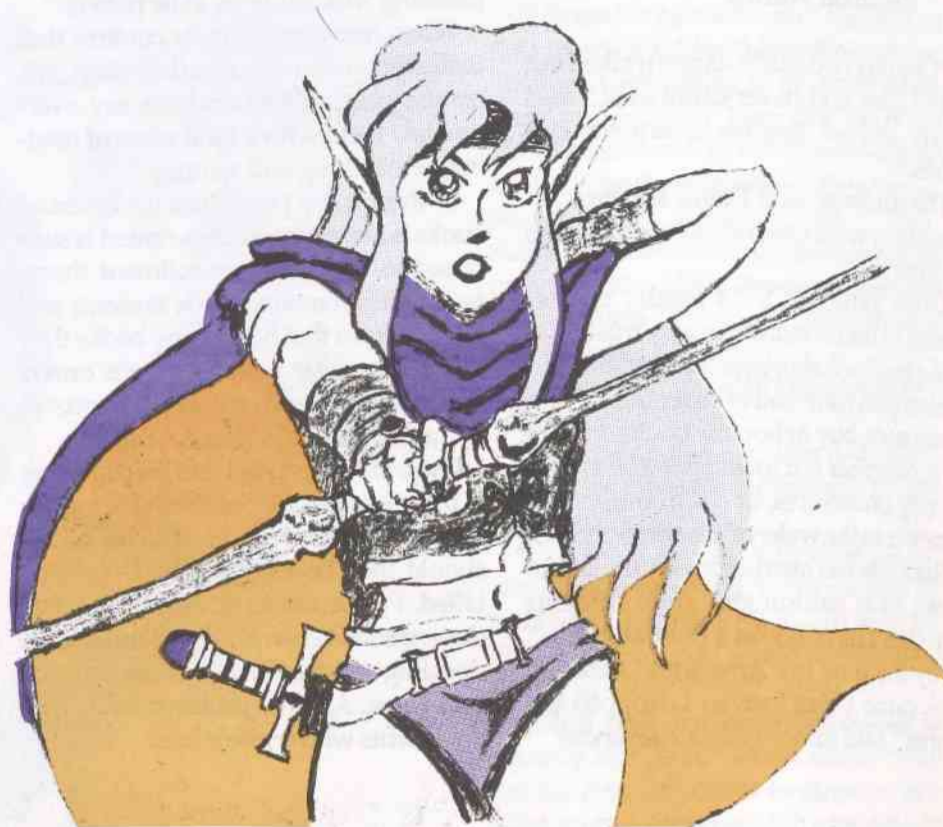
"If you need the boxes get them." I was surprised when a van showed up fifteen minutes later. The driver gave them some boxes with the logo of the flower shop we were using as a cover. We all put on the uniforms, and Wheels took the magnetized Willy Lilly sign and slapped it onto the hovertruck.

"What's going on here!? This piece of rust and plastic is going to outrun the corporate security if things go bad?"

When they started laughing, I knew I had just messed up.

"It's better than it looks," Wheels said in a monotone.

It looked like a hundred other hovertrucks on the road, except it was more beat up, run down, and rusted through than any thing I had seen this



side of the scrap heap. Apparently my opinion showed.

Wheels pulled out a couple of wires from her bag and attached them to her datajacks. When the turret popped up with a miniature Gatling gun, I wasn't impressed. But when the vehicle rotated and the front grill rolled up to reveal a missile launcher and an assault cannon, I almost lost it. I hadn't even heard the engine start up. Hovertrucks are always loud, at least, that's what I thought.

The truck boomed at me in Wheels voice, "I've got a tape of engine sounds that match my appearance. Few people have a problem with my performance."

It was then that I realized that Wheels was a rigger, someone whose nervous system is replaced with cyberware. This allows them to directly interface with their vehicles to the point where they almost become their vehicles.

I checked internal memory space, 357412 Megapulses free, almost two hours of full sense recording. They weren't the only ones with cyberware. I had a full simulated sense rig that would record everything I sensed while it was on. I find that it helps me get more detail in my stories than other reporters. I can't believe how well things are going, I thought. I'm part of a Shadowrun, a quasi- or totally illegal mission. I'm sitting with the cream of the crop of urban predators. I wondered why each of them were

shadowrunners; were they after money, fame, or out to accomplish something? I'd probably never know.

I stopped recording and reviewed the way I set up the meet.

The time / date stamp on the recording read (10:17:36/04-05-53). I was waiting to meet Ms. Deal at the warehouse with no name. She was a fixer, a person who got things done and knew everybody, but more than that she was *my* fixer.

"What's up?" asked Ms. Deal.

"I need some shadowrunners."

"What for?"

"I've got some information I want to get from Ares."

"What about?"

"Chemical weapons."

"How much?"

"1000Mp on a non-matrix system."

"When?"

"Now."

"Cut?"

"200,000 for them, 2,000 for you."

"Done. Meet me at grid quadrant 2975 by 5625."

"I also need information about Ares Headquarters."

"Done."

I had just spent more than I made in two years of normal news reporting for a chance of the story of the decade. The thought of catching one of the megacorporations breaking the multi-corporate ban on chemical weapons made

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