

A COYOTE'S STORY



Kate rushed into her small living room, tossed her shoulder bag on the table, and hurried to the desk; she was late, and knew that the run was getting hot. The computer was on, as she usually left it, and it brightened right away. She clicked on the Osiris icon, and the screen cleared on a cool image: The Vajra of the Osiris Sanction site. Kate found the forums button and clicked on it. She had joined only a few days before. Her friend Jack... Gospel in the Osiris network... had been trying to get her to join for a couple of months, and she had finally agreed. He was pushing a bit more now because they had a run coming up, three members of the team were going to be out of town, and they were short some guns. She was nervous about it, but excited as well. She had heard some amazing stories about stuff that had happened on these runs, and she wanted to be a part of it, but was worried she would let the team down.

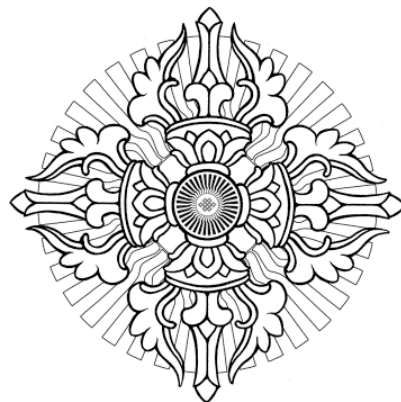
This game is played as you... you don't make up an alternative character. You are you, with one addition: you act as if the existence of the Pyramid, the organization of Overlords that are secretly running everything, is real. This story is written (mostly) from that point of view. Those parts that are at odds with that alternate reality are bounded by this sort of box and in italics.

The forums page popped up, and she went into the private "Holy Rollers" team section and checked the messages there. A few days before they had received a message from Panchen that said, "Pentagon Connection?" They had pondered that for a bit, and Mephistopheles, their researcher, had taken it.

They had his analysis tonight:

"As we all know, the Pentagon is in Arlington. The records I find suggest that the Arlington Police have jurisdiction over the area around the Pentagon, and cooperate with the Pentagon Police. All rescue operations would go through the Arlington Police, for example. Because of this, the Arlington Police have a direct connection to the Pentagon computers. The upgrade to the Arlington Computers might give unusual access to the Pentagon's computer system. If we can confirm the connection and find out who the contractor is for the Arlington upgrade, we might find there is an attempt underway to hack into the Pentagon's computers."

Mephistopheles, she knew, was a guy named Adam. She had not met him yet. He was something of a recluse, but he had the reputation of being the best researcher and problem solver in the business. She was still trying to assimilate everything. She knew that a



Vajra, the Coyote symbol. Several versions of these exist, from this to very simplified versions.

An Alpha run is a real-world excursion aimed at figuring out what was going on with the clues being sent to them. These runs sometimes involve finding a spot and a thing in that spot, and other times might involve finding and talking to a specific person.

A Theta run is a run into the virtual world of the Mainframe.

huge conspiracy existed that tied together many ominous goings-on, but it all seemed unreal to her, still. The Holy Rollers team (among others) had been contacted by this mysterious Panchen, or Panchen 23. Panchen was reputed not to even be human, but a construct that existed only in a virtual reality that had been constructed by a group she thought of as "The Overlords." She had also heard them called "The Illuminati," and even "The Bosses." They were powerful people... well, actually, if what she had heard was true, the MOST powerful people... who had been operating in secrecy for (perhaps) centuries, and in ways that most people could never imagine. They were reputed to have started the internet for their own purposes, and their version of the internet far outstripped what the rest of mankind used.

They were also evil, by any definition of the word. They were bent on using mankind as servants and slaves without mankind even realizing they were being exploited. The Overlords lived in their self-made world in their massively powerful computers and had access to the rest of the world through computers, which, of course, run everything. The Overlords were just interested in power.

The Coyotes (What Kate and her people called themselves) were working with a mysterious entity that appeared to be inside the Overlords' Mainframe and seemed to be intent on trying to take them down. The entity was very knowledgeable and able to arrange for the Coyotes to enter the Mainframe for limited times to complete specific missions. But first the mission had to be defined, and the access set up. Kate had asked about this: If the Mainframe had the time to deal with them, it would realize that they were there, and things would get far more difficult. So they had to know exactly what the mission was before they could go in, and they had to get out again in short order.

The first message defined the mission. They needed more information, but the objective was now clear.

The second message was from Brian, using his Coyote name of Grail:

"You guys know that we are down a member for this run. The Saint, Gabriel and Santana are out of town at a wedding. With Chiron working the Lieutenant position and Mephistopheles doing research, we're still down a slot on our Theta run. I put notices out in the board, and found a guy that will do. He has experience as a Gun Bunny... in fact, has a good rep. His name is Jake, and his Coyote name is Tybalt... he's from a Shakespear-ean group in Tennessee called The King's Men. I've talked to him on the phone, and he seems cool... anyone have any objections to him?"

To actually begin an Alpha run, the team leader must register for a slot on the Osiris web page.

Clearly, it is not possible to keep staff in the field 24/7, so we make these out-of-game appointments to make sure everything is in place when the players get there.

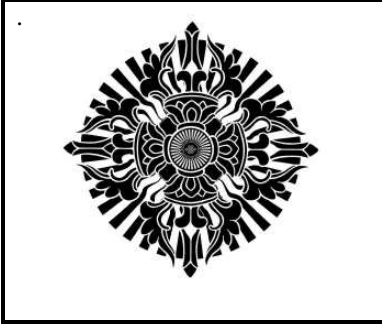
Kate smiled to herself. Of course she wouldn't have any objections, since she was brand new to the group and hardly in a position to object to anything. She was happy to be with the Rollers, as she had found that they had earned quite a name among the other Coyotes. They were renowned for their puzzle solving, and Grail and Gabriel were some of the best Gun Bunnies around. Kate herself was going in as a Gun Bunny, but had no actual experience in combat situations. That was a disadvantage in any position, of course, but having to shoot as well as do some sort of function that required a lot of concentration like, say, disarming a bomb in the same combat was something to get into slowly. For now, just taking orders and shooting was her best chance at being useful.

She hit "Renew" for the page before changing to another screen, and was surprised to see that a new message had come in. It was from Panchen. It said:

"Shirlington Library, 0441012035"

She knew where Shirlington was... it was a small, quaint part of Arlington. What did that have to do with the rest of the clue? She looked at the number. What did that have to do with a library? If it was, say, a Dewey Decimal System number, she could...

Wait. She clicked on Amazon, and entered 0441012035 in the search space. The Book *Neuromancer* by William Gibson popped up. 0441012035 was its ISBN number, which was a unique number assigned to a book upon publication. She wasn't sure who assigned it, but there



This is a Vajra; the most common Coyote symbol.

it was.

She sat there, vaguely surprised. She knew the book, of course.

So...*Neuromancer* in that library, presumably. Now what?

She wrote a note to the group, unsure if she was allowed to do so. She said, "That appears to be an ISBN number, and it's for *Neuromancer* by William Gibson. There is a library in Shirlington... think we need to find that book there?"

She worked on a few other things she had going on in the rest of her life, and noticed another message coming in a few minutes later from Mephistopheles:

"Fast work, Halo. I just got the message, and you hand it back all solved. Yes, I think we are looking in the library in Shirlington for something about that book there. We need to set it up as a run entry point."

Shortly after, Grail sent out a message that they would gather at 11:00 Saturday morning in front of the Shirlington library to begin the run.



Saturday morning, Kate was nervous. She had been only sort of with the team on the first part of the run, but she was still unsure of what was and was not her job. She felt a lot better for having figured out the clue a couple of days before, and had some hope she could contribute.

She sat on the bench, a strong breeze riffling the pages of her notebook. She was reviewing what they had so far, which wasn't all that much. The fact that they had a response from Panchen pushing them to new adventures essentially confirmed they were on the right track, but what that track was headed to was still rather obscure.

She wondered idly if Panchen already knew what was

actually going on in all these exercises. How did he (she?) come up with the clues that led them in the direction they must go, if not? She set that speculation aside for future thought... for the moment, they had to solve the current problem.

She was enjoying the cool fall air. Shirlington was a pretty place. She was sitting back daydreaming a bit, enjoying the fall smells and softer sunlight of autumn. She loved the fall. After a while, she spotted the slightly stocky blonde figure of Dove approaching up 28th Street. With her came tall, skinny, brown-haired Grail.

She stood up, suddenly nervous again, but the small group was clearly relaxed.

"Seen Angel, Halo?" said Grail. "She was supposed to be here early."

"No, you guys are the first I've seen of the group since I got here."

Grail pulled out his phone and tapped on it a moment. "She's inside already. Let's go find her."

They turned and headed for the door. They entered and looked around; none of them had actually been in this library before. There were few actual books, as was the case with many modern libraries. Much of the space was filled with computer consoles and rooms for children's activities and films. What few books there were, were in the stacks on the upper level. They looked up to see the willowy blonde called Angel waving at them. Then they turned to the right and headed for the stairs. When they reached Angel, she pointed at the stacks.

"It should be right in there. I was just going to look."

They trooped down the indicated aisle, and Grail started checking the books closely as he passed them. In a moment he stopped, and pulled a book out of the shelf.

"Here it is." He flipped it open. It appeared to be a normal book with no weirdness about it. He flipped through it, and came upon a slip of paper.

Alpha runs are usually in public places, and never involve weapons.

Care should be taken not to alarm people who are not in the game.

We will usually contact the police or other agencies about what we are doing so there are no misunderstandings.



A more stylized version of the Vajra. Slightly different, but still a Vajra.

He stopped, looked around at them, and pulled it out. They all tried to see it, but he held it back a bit, and read it out loud, "Seek Sarariman at Ping. Password is Chiba City."

They all stood there for a moment. Halo wondered if the others had as little an idea of what that meant as she did. She glanced around. They were all looking thoughtful.

Grail whipped out his faithful phone and tapped away quickly. He then said, "Ok, the message is on its way to Mephistopheles. Let's give him a few."

They put the book back on the shelf after taking the note out, and headed downstairs. They crossed the street to a restaurant called "Busboys and Poets" that Angel had heard of. They found a table inside.

Halo got coffee. Grail got a sandwich; clearly he expected to be there more than a couple of minutes.

Grail was wrong. His phone chimed. He picked it up and looked at it.

"Mephistopheles says he has something." Grail waited as Mephistopheles presumably typed the next message. "Okay... in the book *Neuromancer*, "Sarariman" is the Japanese word for a businessman employed by a large corporation, formed on the English words "salary" and "man." So we're looking for a businessman... ummm... at Ping, whatever that is."

Dove said, "Well, when we were coming up the street, I saw a Chinese restaurant named "Ping." Will that do?"

Halo thought to herself, "Well, duh!" but didn't say anything. Grail said, "That sounds right, Angel. I can't believe I missed that. Let's have a look."

They paid the bill and trooped out, turning left and heading up the street. After turning left on 28th they could see Ping on the corner of Randolph, a short block away.

As they arrived, they saw that Ping was a glass-fronted

modern place with severe furniture inside, a restaurant on the right and a bar on the left. There were tables with chairs outside, so they occupied one. They peered through the windows, trying to not be too obvious about it. There were a few people inside eating, and three at the bar. Grail stood up.

"I'll go in and scope the place out."

He left, and they waited. The season was late and the restaurant wasn't serving outside anymore, so they weren't bothered by a waiter. They watched Grail walk in and scope out the people. None of the tables in the restaurant were occupied by less than two people, which made approaching someone a bit awkward. Grail moved his attention to the people at the bar.

He looked them over. There was an older woman sitting alone talking on her phone, then two guys, both in suits watching TV in a sort of disinterested way. One was tanned and carefully groomed, with dark hair and nervous energy. He was paying attention to the sports report on the left screen. The other guy was a bit scruffier, but still well-dressed, sitting and reading a book. Grail walked past them slowly, moving toward the bathroom at the back of the place. As he walked by the second guy, he saw that the book he was reading was *Neuro-mancer*.

Grail continued to the bathroom, opened the door and went to the sink. As he washed his hands, he was thinking... he had been on these runs before, and knew he was likely to be asked some obscure question that would serve to prove that he was who he was: a coyote on a run and one of the good guys. He thought through what they had so far, wondering what bit was going to be picked on.

He went back out, wandered down the line of chairs, and casually (he hoped) sat next to the target guy. He ordered a Coke and sat back. He glanced at the guy, and saw that he was looking back.

"Good book," Grail said.

"Yeah, and we're all looking for Molly," the guy said.

A run that goes into a restaurant or other public establishment will be marked with a Vajra so that the Coyotes know they are still in "Game Territory."

Businesses will be happy to host us, as we will bring in a bunch of people, and our rules prohibit any sort of disruption.



This is the version of the Vajra that you will see most often: something simple and easy to spot in outline.

Agents that the groups meet will be staff or other players that have earned enough security rating to warrant trust in this role. This is part of the security clearance part of the game.

"Can I help you?"

"I hope so. I'm looking for Chiba City."

The guy looked at him coolly for a few seconds, then reached inside his jacket, pulled out a brown envelope, and handed it to Grail. "That may be your road map, friend. Good luck."

Grail took the envelope and looked at the guy, wondering if there was more, but he had turned back to his book. Grail dropped money on the bar and got up and left.



He walked back to the group, who were all trying to not look expectant, and sat down. He smiled at them.

"Well?" Angel asked. "Did you get anything?"

Grail glanced casually around, leaned forward and dropped the envelope on the table. They all looked at it for a moment. Dove said, "Think we oughta open it?"

Halo thought to herself, "Well, duh!" again, but still refrained from comment. Grail just picked the envelope up and opened the unglued flap. He pulled out a 5x7 photograph.

Halo was taken aback. She wasn't sure what she had expected, but this was not it. They scooted around so they could all see it, generally. It was... a photograph of a dumpster.

Angel said, "A trash bin? What the hell?"

Angel was leaning down to look closely at it. "Yeah, it's a Dumpster in an alleyway."

They all sat back in stunned silence for a moment.

Grail said, "Anyone have any ideas on what this means?"

Halo said, "Well, is it the alley or the dumpster we are interested in?"

Grail said, "Good question. If it's the alleyway, where is it?"

They all leaned close to the picture again. Angel said, "Look... that's a street sign at the mouth of the alleyway. It says... " she leaned very close and lifted her glasses so she could peer under them, "...Arlington Mill. Anyone know where that is?"

Grail said, "Yeah... about four blocks North. It's a long street, though... any other indicators?"

Angel picked the photo up so she could see it better, and said, "I don't see anything." She handed it to Dove. "Do you see anything useful?"

Dove peered at it. "Well, there's that storage place... I can see the edge of the sign... right there. See it?"

They all peered at it again. Grail said, "Yep, I see... the edge of the sign. I can see the stylized "A" they use. So... we're looking through an alley off of Arlington Mill at that storage facility. We know where it is, then. Now what?"

"Maybe something in the alley? Think there's a door or business or something in there?" Angel said.

Dove was still looking closely at the picture. "Hey, there's one of them squashed cockroach thingies on the side of this dumpster."

Grail sat up, looked at her, and blinked. "A what?"

"You know... one of them things, them symbols. They look like a bug been stepped on, like."

"A Vajra?"

Care should be taken in public areas to not look suspicious. Agents of the Pyramid may be watching; but also, from a real world perspective, people acting weird will not be popular. An agent should try to blend in. Any other action will be destructive to the mission.

All sorts of methods can be used to find clues: Messages in email, clues on web sites, twitter messages, and the old-fashioned envelope hidden in an inconspicuous place. Messages could even be things like GPS coordinates.

"Yeah, one of them."

Grail leaned forward to look more closely at the photo. Sure enough, a rusty discoloration on the side of the dumpster closely resembled the Vajra, the symbol of the Coyotes. It did have a squashed-bug look to it.

"Well... I guess we should go and have a look at this dumpster, then."

Half an hour later, they were standing at the Arlington Mill end of the alley. Grail held the photograph in his hand, glancing at it and comparing it to what he could see.

"Yeah, this is it," he said. "There's the dumpster, and I can see the sign of the storage place just there. The Vajra ain't there, though."

Halo said, "Prolly Photoshopped in. Wouldn't be hard."

Grail nodded vaguely, looking at the photo. "Nothing for it then... let's go in."

Halo knew that at this point they were in danger... not physically, but of being observed. The bad guys, if they had any awareness at all of what was going on, might be watching this place. Also, she knew, the Coyotes watched this sort of run, just to find the weak links in their operations. Agents that were too obvious in their actions were curtailed in mission sensitivity. They just couldn't risk being found out.

Grail said, "Right. Let's go." He started down the alleyway, watching around him. He walked casually and slowly, and the group followed, bunched up. Halo said, "Shouldn't we sorta spread out... you know, just in, um, case?" She felt rather foolish. The whole thing still felt unreal to her.

Grail said over his shoulder, "Yes, right, you guys... spread out and try to look as natural as you can in an alleyway."

They got to the dumpster and stopped. Halo wondered if everyone else had as little idea what to do now as she

did.

"Well, let's check out the dumpster, maybe?" Angel said.

They approached it and started to inspect it. Halo could see nothing unusual in her limited dumpster experience, but kept looking. One wall of the metal container was fairly tight to the wall, and there was some unpleasant looking trash wedged in there underneath it. They wandered around it, looking. Angel climbed up on an old broken sawhorse so she could peer inside.

"Ew," she said. "It smells bad in there. Anyone have a light of some sort?"

Halo said, "I have a little LED light on my keychain. Here."

Halo handed it up to Angel, who pressed the plastic button on the side, and a bluish light flashed, surprisingly bright. She pointed it into the cavernous and odiferous interior.

"See anything?" Grail asked.

Angel said, "Nope... a lot of crap. Think I have to get in there?"

Halo, who had wandered to a corner and was peering into the space between the dumpster and the wall, said, "Hey, what's that?"

"What?" Grail asked.

"Another envelope stuck to the side of this thing."

Grail jumped down from the large can he had started to climb and squatted next to her. "Damn, you're right. Here, let me... "

He reached down the space, straining to lengthen his arm enough, managed to slide a finger under a corner, and levered it out. He then managed to grab the corner between two fingers and pulled... it came slowly, but it did come loose.

Players should not be subjected to extreme environments without warning. If they have to get in a dumpster or crawl in the mud, they should be warned so that those willing to participate can dress appropriately.

When a team has finished the Alpha run, the team captain will call and register for a time slot for their Theta run. The team captain then owns the slot, and owes the money for six people. It is up to him to collect the money from his team.

Teams native to the cell will get first priority in slot selection. After some pre-designated time, non-native teams will be allowed to sign up.

He pulled it out and stood up, looking at it. Everyone gathered around him. He started to open it, and then glanced around. "Not here... let's find a better place to talk about whatever is in here." He started back down the alley towards his van, which they had all come in.

Back in the van, they checked the surroundings, suddenly suspicious. They could see nothing.

"So, what have we got?" asked Angel.

Grail opened the envelope and pulled out a piece of paper. "Hmm...lets see."

Halo and the rest waited impatiently while Grail read through it. "Ok," he said. "This is what we needed. It says that Michaels and Sons is doing the Arlington Police installation. That name sounds familiar to me."

He pulled out his phone and dialed. "Mephistopheles? Does the name Michaels and Sons mean anything to you?"

He listened to silence for a minute. Then all of them could hear a voice as it came back on. Grail listened a minute or two and said, "OK, Mephistopheles... got it. Good work. We'll get back to you in a few."

He looked up at the others. "Mephistopheles says that Michaels and Sons is a group on our watch list. They do work for the Pyramid. That's the connection. That's their way into the Pentagon."



Halo walked down the dark street, looking for the sign for Taylor's, the restaurant they were meeting at to prepare for their Theta run. They had sent notes up to Panchen about what they had found, and Panchen had sent back a time and place... they were going to go in.

A Theta run... this was the thing of legend she had always heard about. Combat in a completely virtual

world, where she would be a construct, but the reality of the place was so convincing she might lose herself in it, and start to believe it was real. She had heard rumors of people who were traumatized by "death" there... when ejected by dying, they were hysterical, or, worse, catatonic.

She shivered. She had, of course, talked at some length to her teammates, and knew that wasn't the usual reaction, but this experience did feel quite real. She had a hard time adjusting to the fact that this sort of thing existed. Well... she would be in the middle of it soon. She hoped she didn't let her team down.

Halo saw the place on the corner and went in. She spotted Angel right away and headed for her table. Halo slid in next to Dove. She noted the presence of Gospel, a tall, dark-haired man with very white skin and dark glasses. He had been unable to make the Alpha run. He was their Hacker. She had met him once before, and he seemed pleasant enough, if a bit shy. He was funny, though, when he spoke. She liked him.

Grail was speaking as she approached: "As you all know, information is held in nodes in the Mainframe until it has been scrubbed... certified free of viruses... before it's released into the banks. Our shot at this is during that scrub period. The information being held that we're going after is the actual architecture of the system being installed. We have to grab that file. If we can manage that, we expect to be able to build a back door in the thing that will give us access to information passing through... a huge step forward in this fight. We will have 45 minutes before we're yanked. Not a bad window, but it's said to be a tough node, so we need to be on our toes. Getting done and out fast is what we want, and what we do. Don't screw this up. It's important."

There was a short silence around the table. Angel finally said, "So what time do we go in?"

Grail said, "7:00. About..." he looked at his watch, "ten minutes."

"We better get ready, then," said Angel.

A meeting place for a Theta run will be designated by the plot team. This will be considered a "Safe House," where the players can converse openly about the stuff going on. Thus, the meeting place will have to be carefully chosen. It should be within easy walking distance of the space where the run will take place.

Safehouse



*Vajra marking a "Safe House."
If this is posted in a place, you may speak freely, making certain that you keep your voice at a reasonable level. The walls have ears.*

A Ready Room exists in both the real and virtual world, and is a place set up by Panchen for the Coyotes. It is a null space as far as the mainframe is concerned, and the Coyotes cannot be detected until they enter the Theta space.



This Vajra marks a location as a part of the Osiris network, but the red color denotes a lack of security... there may be other agents here, but watch

The team opened pouches and started putting peculiar assortments of things in them. They wore clothing that was appropriate for action, mostly dark clothes, loose fitting, with a lot of baggy pockets. The equipment they actually carried in was rezzed as they went into Theta, so they didn't need to worry about that. What they wore, though, was persistent into Theta, so thought needed to be given to that. Halo was wearing what Dove had suggested: black cargo pants and a soft dark grey pullover. She fussed with arranging her keys and stuff in her purse until she finally realized that she was just doing something to mask her nervousness. She stopped and looked out the window, then realized that Angel was looking at her hand; she was tapping a rhythm on the table. She snatched her hand under her armpit and glared out the window, feeling her face burn.

She looked around some more. There was another guy at the table that she hadn't noticed before in her nervousness. She noted that he seemed to be a tall guy, and not bad-looking in a Nordic sort of way. He didn't seem that friendly with any of the others in particular. This must be Tybalt, their substitute Gun Bunny. He looked competent enough.

Finally, Grail said, "Let's go." They stood and headed for the door. Halo saw a few others in the place watching them, and realized that there were several teams here. She swallowed hard and went out the door.

She walked behind Tybalt. She looked at him, and realized she was looking at the small of his back. She looked up: the man was enormous! He must be 6'-8"! She stumbled a bit walking with her head all the way back, and started to pay attention again.

Across the street they found a small side door, going, apparently, to a space behind a retail establishment of some sort. It was dark as she went in, with a dim red glow. She blinked.

She felt a hand on her elbow and she was guided to a seat. She sat down and looked around. This was the "Ready Room," a space on the cusp of her world and the virtual world of the Mainframe. She knew that she would be transferring more and more of her awareness

into the Mainframe as she put on her deck and activated programs.

A helmet was handed to her. She looked around and saw that the others were putting them on, so she did the same. Her vision flickered, then cleared. The red light was still there, but seemed brighter now, showing more details. She knew the helmet, which was actually the deck, was interfacing directly with her brain and feeding sensory input into it. She was actually seeing a three-dimensional projection of reality fed by the deck. It would take over completely when her programs had been added. The programs defined what she could interact with in the virtual world.

The team wanted her to go in as a "Gun Bunny"... her entire purpose was to fight through resistance and to provide cover for the team members that had the other functions, like demolitions and hacking. Their guns were going to be weaker than hers, and their attention considerably diverted while using their skills. She wanted to get into demolitions eventually, but needed to just get used to Theta first.

The attendant started to outline the mission. He had an unhurried cadence and was reassuring. He spoke rather matter-of-factly about things she considered to be rather desperate.

He said, "You will go into Theta on my count. When the door opens, go through. We don't expect immediate resistance, but you never know, so be on your toes. Go left to the end of the hallway, then right. You will head generally in that direction. We will feed you information as we get it through Chiron, your Lieutenant."

Chiron. Halo had not met him yet, but knew of him. He was respected for his intelligence and calm, both of which were positive attributes for a Lieutenant. The Lieutenant didn't go past the Ready Room, she knew; he would be their contact with the online information, responsible for interpreting what they could get from Panchen, who could interact in a limited fashion without being discovered. Sometimes, if the situation warranted, things could actually be changed, but that was rare.

A skill is a program loaded in the deck. It allows a Construct (the virtual version of a Coyote) to attempt to do something. Without this loaded, the Construct can't even try. The skill is represented by the device used to execute the skill. This device can't be handed to someone else in a run. The original Coyote is the only one that can use it.

A gun takes a fair number of 'slots' in the deck, and the more powerful the gun is, the more slots it takes. Medics, Hackers and the like must take lighter weapons to be able to fit in their specialized skills.



“MOLLE” vest, used by the Coyotes on runs. They have straps and belts making it easy to hook equipment on them but still light and flexible enough to allow freedom of movement. These vests are designed to fit anyone, from the smallest Coyote to the largest.

She looked at Chiron with curiosity. He was an overweight man in a wheelchair. He was reading a paper through old-fashioned wire-rimmed glasses. He had a mop of unruly hair...she suspected it was red, but it was hard to tell in the red light. He glanced up, apparently feeling her gaze on him, and grinned at her. "Gladdameetcha, Halo!" he said, grinning.

Halo immediately liked him and grinned back. He winked broadly at her, and went back to his paper.

One of the Techs walked up to her and handed her a gun. It was big. She had designed its specifications herself, to do maximum damage in a short time. It shot a middle-range damage round with a couple of extra clips. The rounds did a fair bit of damage, but the rate of fire was mid-range, as she feared ripping rapidly through her ammo and ending up useless halfway through the run. She hefted it... not as heavy as she feared.

The others were getting their equipment, too. Guns for Grail and Tybalt, who was sitting next to her. Dove got a small gun and the Medic's kit. Angel took a wicked-looking shotgun and her favorite demolitions kit, a black hip pouch. Gospel had a small gun and not much else... she remembered he was the hacker, and so supposed that the tools of his trade were in that belt pouch he wore. Everyone was given a MOLLE vest with a walkie-talkie clipped to it. The Tech helped get that thing threaded correctly, the ear bud firmly in her ear, and the small boom mike adjusted in front of her mouth.

Chiron's voice crackled through the ear bud, "Ok, sound off, in order... com test."

Grail's voice said, "One."

There was a pause. Halo suddenly realized she was next to Grail. "Um, two," she said.

Tybalt's voice, surprisingly quiet, crackled back, "Three."

Dove, brisk, "Four." You could hear the adrenaline in

her voice.

Angel said, "Five."

Gospel said, "Six... Let's spank this pig."

Chiron squealed in her ear, and she jumped. Everyone laughed nervously.

"Coyote One, are you go?"

Grail said, "Ready to go, Chiron."

Chiron said, "Ok... head to the door. We'll get the transition started." They walked to the door where the head Tech waited. He stopped them, clearly listening to something they couldn't hear. "Stand by," he said. "On my mark... five, four, three, two, one..."

He flung the door open and hollered, "Get in, get in, get in!"

Grail flung himself through the door. Tybalt pushed up behind Halo, and she stumbled through, too. The space she was in was dark and had a low glow. There was a mist in the air, and she could hear the distant sounds of large machinery. She instinctively crouched, realized she was in Dove's way, and scuttled to the side, trying to see anything that made sense.

It was a fairly normal-looking hallway intersection. They were stopped just short of a corner. She remembered that they were supposed to turn left. She was hugging the left wall, and watched as Grail peered around the corner. A couple of flashes, and Grail jerked his head back. She could hear him muttering, "...so much for 'we don't expect immediate resistance'..." and then she heard the radio crack on. "Two bots just inside. We got no cover... this will be fun."

Grail scuttled back to her and sort of scrunched his head into his neck, and then popped it out along with his gun. Two flashes again, and the sound of Grail's massive weapon firing. Grail stopped, did not move... then one more shot. Grail got up.

Theta runs are usually closely timed. The Coyotes can only be in Theta for a short time or they will be tagged by the Mainframe. The more the Mainframe can ID them, the less effective the Coyotes are, generally. The Coyotes cannot afford to lose the advantage they currently enjoy of the Mainframe not even being aware they are there. Any individual mission would be scrubbed rather than allowing the Coyotes to be revealed.



Coyote on a run.

Runs can be set up in almost any space. Old offices or warehouses are good; old barns, houses, even basements of commercial establishments work well. The only thing needed in addition to the raw space is a room for the Ready Room and another for the Debriefing Room at the end. The space should not be just open... a series of rooms is most desirable, but can be simulated by portable walls and objects like tables or file cabinets.

"Great start. I took a small hit."

Halo was sitting with eyes wide open. She knew it was a virtual simulation, but it certainly seemed real to her. She looked up at Grail.

Tybalt stopped at her feet and held a hand out to her. "Let's go, little sister. Time's awastin'."

She clambered to her feet, feeling conspicuous, but no one had any attention to spare for her. They had started down the hallway, red headlamps shining, and laser sights flashing as they scanned the dark crannies of the place. The mist curled around the edges of her light, making her start as her peripheral vision insisted that something was moving just out of sight. There was a metallic smell and the distant mechanical hammering was starting to get on her nerves. She tried hard to calm down.

At the next corner, they were more careful, Grail getting very close to the floor to look this time. "Clear," he said.

They rounded the corner.

Chiron's voice suddenly crackled in her ear, making her jump. "Hostiles ahead. You need that door on the right."

They set up around the door, Grail, Tybalt and Halo in the center. Gospel stood to one side and grabbed the doorknob. Grail nodded, and Gospel threw the door open. Grail instantly started firing and moved quickly in. Tybalt was hot on his heels, and Halo followed quickly. Grail's shot had found a bot sitting in a chair behind the table, and he was going down. Halo looked wildly around, spotted movement near the doorway to the right, and fired a burst. She was happy the gun was set to burst; she felt certain that she might have emptied the clip otherwise. She had no idea if she had hit anything.

Tybalt was firing left. He looked calm and cool. Grail was kneeling, and watching... he was clearly expecting a target in the center somewhere. Halo moved to the right, splitting her attention between the door she had fired at and the center, where Grail was looking. That

was fortunate, as something popped up and fired at Grail. She fired at the white shape and thought she might have hit it.

Halo whipped her attention back to the first doorway just as a bot charged out of it, firing like a crazed thing. She dropped to a knee and pumped the trigger. In a few moments she heard the click of an empty clip. She quickly swapped out the clips, looking for movement... the bot in front of her had dropped, but she was certain it was still alive.

It wasn't.

She stepped back, her heart pounding. She saw Grail to one side, looking at something. Tybalt was looming around to another side in the dimness. Dove, Angel and Gospel were in a group near the door they had come in... they all looked fairly relaxed. Halo calmed herself.

She straightened up and looked around again. "Not too bad," she thought. "I took one down, and wasn't horrible."

The ear bud crackled again, "Head through that door on your right. The computer is through there."

She was closest, so she stepped forward. She felt a tug at her ankle, and suddenly there was an angry beeping sound off to her right.

"Oops," she thought.

She was almost knocked down as Angel dove past her. Angel slid to a stop on the floor and was looking frantically under the desk. Halo could see her face lit up with a red light that was clearly flashing near her.

"Damn," Grail said. "Bomb!"

Halo suddenly felt ill. She had tripped that thing. She knew that a bomb could wipe them all out. She might have just killed the team.

Angel had her kit out and open, fumbling for a tool. Halo dropped next to her and said, "Can I help?"

Bombs can wipe the whole node, killing everyone in it and destroying everything. There are also bombs that do lesser amounts of damage. It depends on what threat level the Mainframe assessed the node to be in. They will be timed blasts, and usually can be disarmed by a calm and alert Demolitions Tech.

There are also claymore bombs that just go off when tripped. Sometimes bombs can be salvaged by Technicians and carried into the run, to be used later to protect an entrance, for example.



A Mark I Bomb. There are reputed to be later versions of this that are much more difficult to beat.

Angel snarled at her, "Shut up."

Halo sat back, watching and feeling awful. Angel was intent on the thing under the desk. There was the sudden flair of white light as Angel switched her white headlight on. Halo knew that was to help identify the colors of the wires in the bomb to try to identify the combination, which was impossible under the red light they normally used. The combination of colors determined what wire needed to be cut. The sound of the beeping was really getting on her nerves.

Angel grabbed a small notebook from the pack and started to flip pages furiously. She paused, intent on the page in front of her. Halo could see her eyes scanning up and down in the bright reflected light. They locked on something.

"Hah!" said Angel, and she grabbed a wire cutter out of her kit.

Grail said, "Halo, guard!"

Halo guiltily snapped her eyes back to the doorway. She knew her duty was to protect Angel while she was working, and she had been neglecting it. Nothing. She raised up a bit, watching.

The beeping stopped. She heard Angel let out a long breath. "Damn," she said. "That was close."

Grail said, "How close?"

Angel said, "Well, how does 4 seconds sound?"

Tybalt said, "Damn, girl! TOO damn close!"

Halo figured out that they meant that they had been within four seconds of the bomb going off before Angel had cut the wire. Halo worked at slowing her breathing again.

Grail said, "Anyone see anything moving?"

A general round of grunts in the negative sounded from

the darkness. Halo realized her eyes were still dazzled a bit from looking at the white light. She now remembered that was another reason to take care of her duty; it saved her night vision. With this, she also realized that Angel was now effectively blind for a while.

"Guys, 24 minutes left. Get moving." Chiron sounded tense.

Grail said, "Let's move out." He moved to the door and waved Tybalt forward. Halo moved, too, working to the other side to give her a different angle on the space beyond the door. Grail looked around the jamb again, pulled back for a moment, then darted forward and across the room revealed beyond. Tybalt moved as quickly to the other side. Halo moved straight in and headed to the desk she could make out in the gloom. As she was just short of it, the room lit up with flashes and the sound of fire broke out. She hit the floor.

Grail was firing. Halo lay on her back, looking at him. She saw him light up as he took some hits, and he pulled back around his corner, clearly hurt. There was fire over her. She glanced back quickly to see Gospel and Dove firing hard. She felt again as if she was not doing her job, so she low-crawled to the edge of the desk and peered around. There were three bots there. They didn't see her. She targeted the back one, let loose a burst, and he dropped. She quickly moved the sights to the next one forward, and realized that the bot was looking directly at her, its gun moving to aim at her. She fired quickly and was unsure if she had hit, so fired again. As she did so, fire from the bot's right cut into him, and he dropped.

The third bot was looking off to her right, wrestling its gun up and over. Fire hit it, and it dropped, too. Tybalt.

Again, she got up slowly. She looked around... everyone was standing slowly, looking around. The silence was deafening. Dove started to walk to Grail, pulling out her Medic kit.

Halo looked down at the desk. There was a computer on it.

Dead players are out. When players are down, they will have a period of "bleed time," which can vary by the run. If a Medic can get to the player before that bleed time is up, the player might be saved.



Thumb Drives (Hacking kit)

If a player does bleed out, he is expected to remain near the spot where he died and get out of the game area as quickly and unobtrusively as possible. Dead players may not get back into a run by any means.

"Hey..." she said, pointing at it. "Gospel?"

Gospel looked up at her and raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

Halo said, "Um... computer."

Gospel was suddenly at her side. "That's it." he said. He moved to the seat on the other side and pulled out his hacker's tool kit. It was a small thing, consisting only of a flash drive and a notebook. He plugged the flash drive into the side of the computer and bent forward, the tapping on the keyboard getting faster and faster.

Grail said behind her, "Post, people. "

Halo looked up and focused on the room again. She saw that, in addition to the door they had come through, there were two others. She saw that Angel and Grail had one covered, and Tybalt and Dove had the other. She moved around to the side of the desk where Gospel was and crouched at his side as he worked, peering over the desk. She felt she was in the least dangerous position, since they had come through there, and cleared it out.

Didn't they? Could bots be generated just wherever? She hunkered down and began to be serious about her post. Gospel rattled away on the keyboard, completely engrossed in his task. He was moving through the protection levels of the computer, looking for the files they were after. He was muttering under his breath, "...okay, POE, and now... there we go. Damn! Circumvent, go..."

Movement in the door. Damn. Was it? Nothing now...

Suddenly a shape charged through the door she watched, followed by another. She got no clear image of what they looked like. They were humanoid but a bit unfinished-looking. She snapped up her gun and opened fire, screaming, "We got company!"

She fired at the first shape and hit it full in the chest. It moved towards her and then stopped, clearly surprised to see her. It raised its weapon to aim at her...



Bot.

She fired another burst into its chest, and it dropped.

She stared at it, stunned. It had happened so fast...

Four shots hit her in the side. She gasped and rolled to the side, searching... the other shape was there, aiming at her. She tried to get the muzzle of her gun around, knowing it would be too late. It was. Two more shots hit her. "I'm dead," she thought, and rolled over, against the chair Gospel was using, noting he was hiding now on the other side of it, firing his weapon. He got hit.. She glanced back at the thing that had shot her. It was still aiming at Gospel, but a bolt hit it from its right. It twisted, crouching, and fired that direction, then leapt forward and out of her sight.

She lay there, slowly beginning to realize that she was not, in fact, dead. She knew that if she was bleeding out, she would have other symptoms. She checked the health readout. She wasn't dead, but damn close. She glanced at Gospel. He was down, out, and bleeding out. She sat up quickly, knowing there was only a short time to save Gospel. Without him, it would not be possible to get into that computer, and she had been responsible for guarding him.

She rose to a crouch, looking at the source of all the noise. The creature that shot her was there, firing madly into a tangled group of chairs and desks. Gunfire answered it, but the group there was clearly overwhelmed. She raised her weapon, aimed, and fired, burst after burst...

The thing fell. Halo looked wildly around and spotted another one coming in from the dimness to her left. She fired again, then heard a click indicating an empty clip. She whipped up another one, sure that a shot any moment would take her down. The clip clicked home, and she raised the gun again, noticing that the bot's attention had been drawn to that warren again, which had someone in it, firing.

She shot the thing, pumping round after round into it. It turned her way, began to aim, and fell.

She stood there, panting, tracking the gun back and

Medics can pump health into a Coyote. Remember that these are computer constructs, and what seems artificial in real world terms is quite reasonable in the reality of Theta.

Hacking is a complex and rigorous discipline, using a variety of tools that must be timed just right. It is possible to get some simulators to practice these skills in the Real World to make success more likely on a run.

forth. "Dove! Gospel is down!"

A shape popped out of the warren and moved quickly her direction. Halo watched the darkness, straining to spot any movement. Dove dove past her, but Halo didn't watch. She continued to scan the room. She heard Dove say, "Thank god..."

Another shape moved in the tangle of desks. Grail stood, then Tybalt. Halo said, "Angel?"

Grail shook his head and joined in scanning the room. Tybalt moved to the other door, on guard.

Behind her, she heard Gospel say, "Ok... thanks, Dove. Let me get back to work."

Halo squatted again, shaking a bit as the adrenaline flow decreased. She was a bit numb, and on autopilot, scanned, ready.

After a few minutes, Gospel said, "Got it. I'm in."

She turned to look at him quickly, noting the look of satisfaction on his face, then reminded herself that though his job was over, hers wasn't. She began to scan again.

Grail was beside Gospel. "Whatcha got?"

"Well, here's the file on the connection. I grabbed that. It's the architecture of the installation. I think that's what we're after."

"Anything else?"

"I'm checking now. I think so."

Halo knew that sometimes it was possible to grab some programs out of Theta that were improvements on the standard Ready-Room programs. These were the treasure of a Theta run. They were valuable in and of themselves... the programs couldn't be shared or copied, but they could be sold or loaned. Several of these programs could make a Coyote a very popular fellow.

"Yeah," Gospel said. "Two gun programs, 1.1 and 1.2."

And we got a Hacking 1.2! Woot!"

Grail said, "Great!"

*A dead Coyote will usually
be waiting in the debrief-
ing Room.*

Ear buds crackled, and Chiron said, "Yeah, great. You guys have two minutes to get out the exit or you're gonna get tagged. Move it! It's through the door that was to your right as you came in the room. Not far."

Grail grunted and said, "Saddle up! We gotta go!"

Everyone grabbed their stuff and, still wary, moved to the door, Tybalt bringing up the rear. Resistance seemed to have melted away, but Halo knew it was just a matter of time before any bots showed themselves. She itched to go faster.

"Here we are," Grail said. "Chiron... get us outta here."

A grunt in the ear buds. The door sighed open a bit. Grail grabbed the door knob, pulled it open, and rushed through. The rest followed. They were out.

They were in a room very similar to the Ready Room. It was dim, and Techs were watching them. The sudden change in surrounding made Halo blink a few times, then she realized she could bring the gun down. She did, and with it, she began to realize she had done it.. she had lived through the run.

Angel sat on a bench, looking run over. She looked up at them ruefully. "I hear you guys did it?"

"Grail said, "Yeah...our newby saved our butts."

Halo wondered who he was talking about, then realized they were all looking at her. "Me? I SUCKED! I tripped the bomb, and froze under fire. I was TERRIBLE!"

Grail said, "You popped up and took out two badbots just as we were getting hosed. We were down, all of us out except Tybalt, thank god... Halo, and if not for you, we would have been out. You saved this mission."

She stood there, thinking. "I popped up because I was shot and thought I was dead. I popped up when I finally

This run describes a mission to get information. As noted, the architecture of the installation will be used to design a "back door" for the Coyotes that will allow them to monitor the traffic on this link, giving them a tremendous advantage in intelligence gathering. The only problem is, of course, that it will take another run to plant the virus that will build that back door for them. So Halo's "next week" is likely to happen, because of the success of this mission.

realized I wasn't."

"Yeah, that's what I said."

Halo was stunned. "But I was scared to death! I just did the only thing I could!"

Grail said, "Well, many wouldn't have. Many would have just laid there, scared. You got back in it, in a tough situation. Halo, I'll take you any time you want to go into Theta."

Halo looked around the room. Everyone was smiling at her and nodding. "Well," she said, "What about next week?"

