



A Scenario for *Altered Carbon: The Role Playing Game*
Inspired by the Netflix Original series
based upon the novel by Richard K. Morgan

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WELCOME TO CENTRAL, THE UN PROTECTORATE'S name for the midsection of United Britain. The heart of this sprawling, messy, thriving, metropolis is the city of Birmingham, but Central is so much more. Having devoured surrounding cities like Nottingham and Leicester, the great urban sprawl engulfed Cambridge and its universities and swallowed up most of Wales. Birmingham still has pride of place: if you follow the threads of money and power in from the edges, they knot together in the hermetically sealed Hub where Birmingham city center used to stand and where Britain's first Meth and her peers pass their infinite time.

"Birmingham" is divided into Insiders, who have the money and status to seal themselves away in The Hub, and Outsiders killing time as best they can in a city whose pleasures are only ever distractions from the grind of existence. As in other cities and states across the globe, the Protectorate provides a basic income, but it's not enough to provide purpose. Central sells itself as a thriving center of industry, and the truth is it held out longer than most other places, especially after the Fall of London... but jobs for life — jobs at all, in most cases — are ancient history here, as they are elsewhere in the Protectorate.

HISTORY OF BIRMINGHAM

21ST CENTURY

The 21st century was still young when the UN became the UN Protectorate, and the UK became a republic — more accurately a Protectorate territory. Almost overnight, the royal family became a group of extremely wealthy individuals without title or

public funding. At the time a wave of protest swept the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland — but after a summer of powerful discontent, the riots and polemics faded away, and United Britain was born. Over time, the monarchy became an historical footnote, about as interesting as the civil war or medieval castles.

In 2030, shortly after the first Elder artifacts were discovered on Mars, the Longbridge Air & Space Corporation was founded to represent British interests in Martian exploration. The mysterious loss of the colony ship Mercia proved devastating to confidence in Longbridge and the company shut down soon afterwards.

In 2042, Central's Roma and Irish Traveller populations lodge a legal protest to oppose loss of land and the inability to carry out their traditional lifestyle. Miraculously, they won the case and became a semi-autonomous enclave within Birmingham.

By 2060, Nadia Makita had engineered cortical stacks and synthetic sleeves were available in Britain and worldwide. When wealthy, young, heiress Georgina Caveney died of heart failure, she became the first person in Britain to be resleeved into a different body.

London became increasingly polarized: new technology and investment — and the first generation to be resleeved — meant the rich got considerably richer and life became more of a struggle for just about everyone else. The problems endemic to the Protectorate — low quality of life, lack of rights and social mobility — drove the population of London to outright rebellion against the upper class. Oligarchs and former aristocrats fought back with private

military forces, and the chemical and biological agents used to subdue the populace left London little more than a scar on the landscape. In response, the UN jailed several people and imposed numerous restrictions on London's freedom. It suffered economically — as did the rest of South UK — for many decades as a result.

Not coincidentally, Birmingham became Britain's first city in terms of its economy, its cultural authority, and its size. With the upper class frightened of the possibility of "another London," the labor movement gains power and fights for a better job market and higher quality of life for average citizens than is seen elsewhere in Europe and North America.

Towards the end of the century, Oxford and Cambridge universities merge into Oxbridge Academic Institutes. The new corporate entity won a huge number of (corporate funded) research programs as well as manufacturing contracts. The Institutes obtained a lot of patents and grew very, very, rich. Education remains a minor revenue stream for them, but it's far less lucrative than research.

22ND CENTURY

Birmingham-Zenith was formed in 2174. The fledgeling corporation initially focused on cleantech: more fuel-efficient energy sources, cleaner cars and trains, and smart technology to monitor and optimize energy usage. The latter function eventually spun into the concept of City Sense: a Central-wide network of data capture and analysis designed to make Central run smoothly.

Elsewhere in the region, the long-dormant Longbridge Air & Space Corporation resurfaced, with no clear line of funding but big ambitions. Compared to some of its competitors, Longbridge positioned

itself as "the nice guy" of corporations. It worked in the lucrative interstellar cargo sector, complied with all of the UB labor movement's guidance and best practices, and brought a lot of jobs and wealth to the region. That image persists well into the 24th century, largely because no one has yet uncovered Longbridge's two secrets: it's funded by, and largely a front organization for, the former royal family... and it has an off-world, off-the-record, research facility whose purpose is secret for all but the highest level of executive clearance.

Elsewhere in the Protectorate, Rawlings Virus wiped out the Envoys, and the North American Corporate Wars raged.

23RD CENTURY

Throughout the 23rd century, Birmingham's population continued to rise, the metropolis spread and engulfed other Midlands towns, becoming the vast megacity Central is today. The number of jobs did not rise, and over several decades Central's reputation as a boomtown became nothing more than a lie the city told itself. Jobs did not keep up with growth, and more and more Outsiders found themselves unoccupied and reliant on the opiates of entertainment and vice to give their lives meaning.

In spite of the facts, most people in Central continued to believe in the mythical opportunities for advancement. Those who couldn't get a job or get ahead, they believed, had only themselves to blame: they just weren't trying hard enough.

Crime spiralled, and more private security firms — many of them the civilian branches of military contracting companies — were drafted to police the growing, dangerous city.

24TH CENTURY

Birmingham-Zenith released their first version of City Sense, monitoring traffic flow, footfall, and energy consumption across Central. As the system's AI learned and grew, the software iterated rapidly until, by 2380, it became sophisticated enough to derive shortlists of suspects for 70% of crimes in Central.

After centuries of disruption, London finally began its recovery. With the residue of chemical and biological weapons finally neutralized, people — and money — moved back into the old capital. Some of that money moved directly out of Central: even a couple of centuries wasn't enough to make Meths think of themselves as Brummies rather than Londoners. South United Britain, as a region, stumbled back towards prosperity, and for the first time Central experienced in-UK competition.

Over time, the populace acknowledged that Birmingham was no longer a thriving city where anyone, however humble, could work hard and have what they want. A huge workforce desperate for money to keep them above the bare minimum level the Protectorate subsidized, led to the degradation of workers' rights. This process came to be called "Americanization," not because of any actual US influence but because of British perceptions of how the huge underclass of North America lived. Being "unlike America" is a British value that persisted long after both Britain and America became part of the global one-state government of the Protectorate.

By 2368 a movement had emerged, urging Britons to push back against "Americanization" and hold onto their rights. A charter existed, calling for "restoration of dignity" and special provisions under the Protectorate, but over time peaceful protests became violent, with anti-Americanization groups turning their anger on any convenient target: corporations laying off workers, Insiders who strayed out of The Hub, even the grey- and black-market suppliers who profiteered off need and desperation.

The Anti-Americanization Coalition (AAC) was quickly declared a terrorist movement, and Central's private security firms cracked down hard. Three ringleaders — Tom Whitehouse, Ismat Mirza, and Bradley East — were arrested and imprisoned. Georgina Caveney's intervention saved them from Real Death, though her motivations remain obscure. Only the most trusting believe the media spin that presented her as "a woman of the people" and "the heart of Britain."



FEATURES & LANDMARKS

DEMOGRAPHICS

Roughly two-thirds of Central's population are white — ranging from “White British” to “White European” to “other” (meaning a scattering of North American or Australasian immigrants). Most, but not all, of the remaining third are of South Asian descent, and Central is also home to most of United Britain's Roma and Irish Traveler populations. The traveler population is entirely settled: a traveling lifestyle is impossible in this sprawling, overpopulated megalopolis.

While there are a small number of historically Asian neighbourhoods and districts, most of Central is cosmopolitan. Every ethnic group is hit equally hard by stretched incomes, ennui, and lack of opportunity; every ethnic group has an equally negligible chance of ever making it to the middle class. In The Hub, ethnicity has lost most of its meaning. Meths are an identity to themselves.

The only exception to this general tendency are the Travelers known as the Erdington Families. These people fought hard for territory to call their own, and they remain a distinct community — partly because the rest of Central continues to hold a number of unpleasant and inaccurate stereotypes about them.

URBAN SPRAWL

Most of C-UB is a single, vast, metropolis. Other towns and cities in the Midlands were absorbed into Birmingham's growth and while some parts of the region retain a few highly local slang phrases or an occasional twentieth century building, no one talks about Coventry, Leicester or the other “old towns” as anything except part of Central.

Central is infamous for solemn, brutalist architecture that dominates the metropolis with vast edifices of concrete. Some people call Central “350 miles of prison walls.” It's a little better when the sun sets and the lights come on, and neon dances over the grey slabs of the fortress-like tower blocks. That's probably why the city only really comes alive at night.

WATERWAYS

Birmingham's canals powered the Industrial Revolution, and the UN declared them historical conservation areas as early as the mid-21st century. Central has more miles of waterway than Venice ever did, and they've survived centuries of growth. With no funding for maintenance, except the occasional burst of charity from some mysterious benefactor in The Hub, most of the water is green and sluggish, and a dumping ground for everything from medical waste to human remains, but there are sections that still run clear as crystal — occasional flashes of brilliant beauty in the dull grey of the city.

Since most of the canal network is of no interest to anyone, it's almost unscrutinized. Central's advanced monitoring software [City Sense](#) doesn't always factor it into calculations. If you need to do business off the books in Central, do it on the water.

TRANSPORT

Getting around Central is easy. Motorbikes, cars or taxis, all operated by weak AIs are common for people who can afford them. Actual driving licenses are rare (and prohibitively expensive), and City Sense knows when you're operating a car yourself. Leave it to the AI. People who want to stay off the grid know how to fool City Sense, but that will cost you too.

The road network is a patchwork of old and new highways, and the outward and upward growth of the urban sprawl means that a mile of road might dive through tunnels under the city or soar across overpasses fifty feet above ground level. While City Sense routinely monitors every inch of road, some sections are so inaccessible they're easy to hack and hard to repair, even with a fleet of drones. There's always somewhere in the road network you can work unobserved, but it can be tough to keep up with where. A blackspot you used last week might have its cameras and sensors back online — and you might never know until it's too late.

Central's fast, efficient, and highly monitored network of bullet trains are the mode of transport for most Outsiders, even those close to the center of Central. Taking the train almost always means passing through the overcrowded, brutalist hellscape of Birmingham New Street.

EDGBASTON CRICKET CLUB

In Central sport, not religion, is the opiate of the masses. Most sporting pastimes happen indoors, in brightly lit, custom-built spaces with air conditioning and vending machines. Not so in Edgbaston. Cricket is still played outdoors on pristine, lovingly tended greens. Everything is done “the old fashioned way”: the Meths in The Hub wouldn't have it any other way. Almost everything on-site is handled by actual humans, from management to maintenance.

Gambling is legal and extremely popular throughout the UK, but the bets placed at Edgbaston are different. Extravagant, life-changing sums of money change hands, wagered on every possible outcome from scores, to injuries, to questions like whether a ball will strike a bird in flight. Betting is managed by

local and international criminal syndicates. Bribes, threats, corruption and violence are par for the course, and kept discreetly out of the public eye.

CAVENEY NATIONAL EXHIBITION CENTRE

Formerly just the National Exhibition Centre, Georgina Caveney purchased the property and the commercial operation fifty years ago. An impossibly broad range of events happens here, from business expos debuting cutting edge healthcare or military tech, to conventions celebrating the latest entertainment fads — occasionally both at once, in some of the sprawling complex's separate exhibition halls.

Most events are open to the public, assuming they can afford tickets or get lucky in the lottery that provides a couple of hundred free tickets to lucky winners. That makes the CEC one of the few places outside The Hub where it's possible to rub shoulders with Insiders. Naturally, that means security is airtight.

THE ROTUNDA

One of Birmingham's first sky-high buildings, the Rotunda has extended and stretched, become a needle-slim, five kilometer spire that dominates The Hub. It's the personal paradise of Georgina Caveney and a select few other mega-rich individuals, living in “vertical estates” that could house thousands of Outsiders.

This dazzling, blue-lit tower has nothing in common with the lumpen, concrete edifices common in the rest of Central. It's elegant and sleek, a needle pointing to a bright future. It's also the most visible symbol in the city of the separation between the Insiders and everyone else.

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY

Cambridge's many colleges have barely changed in five hundred years. The university was designated a UN conservation area just after its millennial celebrations in 2209. While the rest of the city grew taller and more grey, the university remained an archaic, peaceful contrast of green lawns and pale stone. The only clue that time has passed is the absence of students.

There are still some, of course. The offspring of the hyper-rich still value higher education, but there aren't many of them. Nowhere near enough to fill thirty-one colleges, and with relatively few applicants, money and connections are far more important than academic prowess in determining who is accepted. Some of the college buildings are now conference venues or luxury hotels, or even empty, unoccupied gems in the investment portfolio of huge corporations.

The university's money and prowess now come almost entirely from the research it conducts as [Oxbridge Academic Institutes](#). Cambridge undergraduates with promise are funneled into funded postgraduate study, then straight into a corporate career. While the university itself is out of reach to all but the wealthiest, OAI conducts thorough screening and talent searches, and the best and brightest from Central and around UB are invited into the corporation's "academic internship" programme. It's not as prestigious as a Cambridge degree, but it's a whole lot tougher and more valuable.

ENTERTAINMENT

Outside of corporate campuses and meth high society, entertainment in Birmingham bubbles up through the cracks in this industrial mega-city's orderly regime. Every local knows the best parties happen underground — literally and figuratively, with event organizers regularly loading up as much gear as they can fit in a van and disappearing into the subways and tunnels beneath Central for narcotics-fuelled raves that run until City Sense's cameras are reinstated, or someone tips of Legion. Thanks to this scene, Birmingham has a thriving live music scene, with new subgenres fizzing up and sparking out over months and years.

For those who like their leisure time more low-key, a lot of socializing takes place in VR, either at home or on rented gear at one of Central's many VR cafes. A virtual "home" is usually far more suitable for entertaining visitors than the poorly heated shoeboxes UN basic income allows for. Plus, it's a lot easier to keep surveillance out of VR.

KEY DISTRICTS

Central is huge. There are dozens, even hundreds, of districts ranging from the size of a 21st century city to a handful of streets. There are so many venues and organizations it would be impossible to list them all. The areas described here give a flavor of Central, and provide a basis for you to create locations of your own, or pre-made backdrops for your noir or action games.

THE HUB

The Hub used to be central Birmingham. It contained homes and businesses, crammed in together, and thousands of people passed through every day. Now it's a private paradise for the tiny number of people wealthy enough to afford its property prices.

Every Meth in Central lives in The Hub, but not every Insider is a Meth. Some have made their money in the span of a normal human lifetime, or inherited a gradually accumulating amount from earlier generations of their family. Most of those people will re-sleeve as soon as they become dissatisfied with their natal sleeves, continue doing so forever, and join the ranks of the Meths. There's no such thing as a middle class in The Hub, but there are degrees of wealth: younger residents, or those with only a modest fortune (measured merely in eight or nine digit sums), are frequently disparaged, socially snubbed, and treated – subtly — as second-class citizens.

Access to the Hub, short- or long-term, is highly restricted. Security and overcrowding are the most often-cited reasons: those inside The Hub are likely to be the targets of vendettas and criminal activity, and the best way to safeguard them is to ensure that only residents, staff, and public service professionals (e.g. doctors and law enforcement) are permitted to move freely between the Hub and the rest of Central. With a literal curtain wall around the entire district, these restrictions are easy to enforce.

THE ROTUNDA

The Rotunda was Birmingham's first sky-high building, but its original form would barely make up a single luxurious estate in the current iteration of the historic structure. Standing five kilometers high and wider than most city blocks, The Rotunda is by far the most fashionable building in The Hub, and by extension, in Birmingham. It's also the tallest, and prices for swathes of its covetable real estate increase the closer one gets to the clouds.

Notably, none of the space in the Rotunda can be bought, only leased from a company called Small Island Estates. Trace back their tangled web of ownership far enough, and SIE is part of Longbridge Air & Space Corporation. And that means that the most lucrative investment property in Central is owned by the former royal family. Not that that means anything, of course. The Windsors are entitled to accumulate wealth. It might be more problematic if they'd bought themselves a base of operations for all kinds of scandalous and illegal activities, that happened to be surrounded by rich, litigious people who value their privacy above all else. Oh. Wait. They did in fact do exactly that.

Sophie, Henry, and Charles Windsor all make their home in The Rotunda, but their names are not on any deeds or census listings. The top five levels of the building are reserved for the sole use of SIE, purpose not specified.

THE GARDEN

The millions of Outsiders in Central have VR cafes to pass the time. Insiders have more money, more time, and therefore much more rarefied tastes. Only reality will do.

The Garden is somewhere between a hotel, a concierge service, and an event planner. For a colossal budget, they will dedicate a space to bringing to life your every pleasure. Want to play shepherdesses, like a modern-day Marie Antoinette? Experience a life with real stakes, where every choice matters, in a simulation of the historic or fictional war of your choice? Maybe run an entire kingdom, complete with subjects? The talented team of designers at The Garden will make it happen, make it last as long as you can pay, and won't bat an eye at even the most outrageous requests.

Outsider cast members are recruited for these simulations of meaningful lives, but of course none are harmed in the production of an event. The Garden's policy states that categorically, Not that anyone would know if people were harmed, since participants are paid extremely well to speak of nothing that happens at these events, and missing persons cases that involve Outsiders who somehow get Inside tend not to be followed up. The bureaucracy involved is a nightmare.

BARROWMORE

Named after her family's Victorian factory and estate, Barrowmore is the sleek, black glass tower where Georgina Caveney makes her home. It's not the grandest building in the Hub, but it's still palatial. What really distinguishes Barrowmore is that over half of it is reserved for the use of Georgina's staff,

who live almost as well as the Caveney family. The building is set up to maintain the feel of a country estate, albeit one stacked vertically on top of itself: each floor gives the feel of being outside, with mixtures of artificial and real flora and fauna. Homes are single-family dwellings that give the impression of nineteenth century worker cottages, but have every possible modern convenience.

CITY SENSE

One of the most significant advantages to living in The Hub is the ability to opt out of City Sense. The program still operates there, with surveillance all over the district, and considerable resources, but residents have the option to exempt themselves. Most Meths, and other wealthy residents, are effectively invisible to City Sense unless they choose not to be. Within The Hub, they don't appear on cameras, the energy usage and data traffic of their homes are not monitored, and they are generally completely beyond scrutiny. They may choose to have law enforcement or other emergency services respond to emergencies in their vicinity... or they may have their own arrangements for that.

It would be naïve to think that this ever works against the Meths' interests: this is a group of paranoid, obscenely wealthy individuals. If they've opted out of emergency responses, it's only so that they can keep their secrets. Sleeve death doesn't phase them, property damage doesn't meaningfully damage their resources, and if they're under any real threat they've usually got a few highly trained mercenaries with questionably legal augmentations close at hand. Insiders are fearless, because they can afford to be.

NEW STREET CORRIDOR

The wall around The Hub is very close to indestructible. There are very few entrances and exits at ground level: Insiders tend to leave by air, with landing pads on most buildings and an abundance of human-chauffeured flying cars — licenses only granted to those living Inside, to control congestion.

The only exception is the area around New Street Station. In this corridor, made up of a handful of streets and a single wide road, rail ticket holders are allowed access an hour before and after the departure time on their ticket (or, for tickets without specified times, up to one hour from entering The Hub). In theory, there's no way into the rest of The Hub from the corridor: City Sense, as well as human law enforcement personnel, make it impossible. In practice, human beings are resourceful, and if someone needs to slip into The Hub, the New Street Corridor offers the best chance of doing so undetected.

NOTABLE RESIDENTS

MARINA CROWLEY

When death loses all meaning and growing old gracefully ceases to be a concern, the immensely wealthy must find purpose through other means. Marina offers one such means through a wellness empire that she started two centuries ago. The treatments and tonics she peddles are largely useless, but add a layer of mystique and the desperate desire for life eternal, over a bottle of scented oil and you can get people to believe in anything. Marina believes more faithfully than anyone.

Marina is a peculiarity amongst Meths, preferring bodies that show signs of age — crows feet, the occasional laugh line. She feels that these give her

an air of wisdom and believability. Whether she is actually related to the 20th century occultist Aleister Crowley or simply adopting the name is unknown; Marina wears the assumed connection with pride all the same.

GLORY

Known only by his stage name, Glory is a relative newcomer to The Hub, after becoming a worldwide musical phenomenon five years ago. Glory is rakish and sly, fully living up to the rock star image he portrays on stage. Many Insiders chafe at the idea that he was able to buy his place within The Hub's walls so quickly, something that delights Glory to no end. He maintains an open rivalry with Mickey Jordan, using the mogul's nostalgic popularity to keep his name in the headlines.

Glory revels in disrupting the jaded social world of the Hub, and therefore makes a good Contact for characters. He'll throw wrenches in Meths' plans just because he knows he's super rich enough to get away with doing so. It would be wrong to think he has any grand ideas about change, though. He loves his wealth and privilege, and would never risk anything that might damage him. He avoids scandals of his own, too. He hasn't upset his neighbors badly enough yet to learn how good they are at creating scandals and making them stick.

Glory is a tall, lean man of Indian descent with long, silver hair and stylishly gothic androgyny. Only in his mid-thirties, has yet to even think about resleeving. His youth is a huge part of his appeal, and one of the reasons his presence in The Hub causes such polarized reactions: some think he's a breath of fresh air, others that he's a mayfly who never should have got past the wall.

BALSALL HEATH

Most of Central is a blend of people of different ethnicities and nationalities, but Balsall Heath, colloquially known as “Balti Triangle,” just to the south-east of The Hub, is and always has been a predominantly South Asian area. Predominantly doesn’t mean exclusively — there are numerous white, black, and East Asian residents — but the character of Balsall Heath is most definitely shaped by its majority Pakistani Muslim community. The district is known as a hub for good food, socialising, and as a relatively safe place to relax.

The Triangle is also a residential area, and a relatively middle-class one. Outsiders, especially those from South Asia and the Middle East, who don’t have the local status or connections to buy their way into The Hub often stop here. While it suffers from the same brutalist architectural malaise as a lot of Central, its buildings are well maintained and new and there’s a certain distinction to living in one of the cleanest and safest parts of the megalopolis.

Many residents and visitors also appreciate that the pleasures on offer in Balsall Heath are fully legal, and generally come in varieties that do not exploit anyone involved.

Alcohol is available in restaurants and cafes catering to visitors, but generally not served in most establishments focused on local clientele: the majority of Balsall Heath’s residents are Muslim, descended from Muslims, or just prefer to steer clear of alcohol. Sex and drugs are strictly off-limits: no brothels, overt or otherwise, no dealers, and no tolerance for customers who show up under the influence of alcohol or narcotics.

BLACK BOX

Black Box is just one of many VR cafés in the area, but it’s the best regarded. This small, independent, café programs a lot of its own VR experiences, making them unique. Feedback — in and post session — is captured from every user, and looped back into development to tailor each VR scenario for maximum emotional pay-off. Most of that development is algorithmic, but there are genuine human programmers behind it all, for that personal touch. Getting onto Black Box’s freelancer list is a reliable, lucrative, and above all legal way of earning a living.

Just as importantly, Black Box offers aftercare as part of its standard service: an hour in one of several quiet rooms to decompress and readjust to reality. For an added service fee, customers can dive back into VR to talk with a licensed therapist about what they just experienced.



HYATT HALL

Post-secondary education is expensive and hard to access, and while evening lectures — in person, in an actual, physical space — are not to every resident of Central's taste, Hyatt Hall has a thriving base of learners. Lectures on everything from science, to ethics, to the history of cinema, take place most weeknights across its three floors of lecture halls and seminar rooms in the tenth to twelfth floors of a sky-high, residential tower. Most are sponsored by Hyatt Foundation: a philanthropic organization funded by Laila Hyatt, a centuries-old Insider. Central's largest corporations also fund lecture series on their particular interests: Elder culture, other settled worlds, data security and AI, amongst many other cutting-edge topics. It's said that Oxbridge Academic Institutes occasionally recruits academic interns out of attendees.

EMIRATI

With its motto of "Inside, outside," Emirati represents the closest thing to glamour that most of Central ever gets to experience. Designed to simulate the glitz and luxury of famous Middle Eastern playgrounds of the wealthy, it's about as faithful to Emirati cuisine as the Balti is to Indian cooking (which is to say, not at all).

CLIFTON TOWERS MARKET

Mo and Zeeshan Khan run the black market in Balsall Heath, and keep it stocked with imported goods from all over South Asia and the Middle East. Foodstuffs, fabrics, household goods and entertainment media are all available every night after the respectable eateries and VR parlours shut their doors. It's another big advantage to not having drunk Outsiders lurching around the streets after midnight.

LOCAL CRIME

Only one organized syndicate operates in Balsall Heath, and it's the Khan Family. Apart from running the Night Market, they spend far more time keeping other gangs and black marketeers out and keeping non-organized crime down than taking advantage of locals.

NOTABLE RESIDENTS

SHAYAN KHAN

If there is one person you don't want to cross in Balsall Heath, it's Shayan. Second in command of the Khan Family, Shayan is sharp-witted and ruthlessly efficient. His primary focus is the benefit of the community within Balsall Heath. He has notoriously gone after other gangs before when he's felt that they've threatened those under his protection, wiping out whole crews effectively overnight.

When he isn't protecting "his" district, Shayan spends his time visiting local establishments both large and small and discussing the proprietors' wellbeing and concerns. He makes a point of visiting each business within Balsall Heath at least once a month.

ZAINAB BASHIR

Every neighborhood has a busybody, and Zainab prides herself on being Balsall Heath's. There isn't a secret or juicy bit of gossip within the Triangle that she doesn't know. Zainab has a kindly face and a warm smile; paired with a ready cup of tea and a sympathetic ear, she has a knack for getting people to spill their heaviest fears and darkest secrets before they even realise what they've said.

While she gives the impression of being a mother and housewife, she also happens to be one of Central's foremost information brokers. She didn't intend to be, at first, but when she was looking for a new purpose in life after her eldest son moved out of the house, she came to realise that all those secrets she hoards have a value.

HOORAIN TAHERI

Born in UAE, Hoorain immigrated to Central UB as a young adult. She owns and operates Emirati. She revels in the opulence of the establishment, and in her eyes, provides one of the most valuable services in Central by giving Outsiders a taste of the sublime. Hoorain is vain and needy, but not without her charms. She claims to be the longtime lover to one of Central's Meths, but she refuses to say who.

In truth, Hoorain is asexual and uses the rumour as a convenient lie to dissuade would-be suitors. She does, however, cultivate a friendship with Charles Windsor, serving as one of his worst influences.

DIAMOND MILE

Back when the middle of Central was Birmingham, and it wasn't a mega-city that spread like concrete-colored fungus across the breadth of Britain, there was a district called The Jewellery Quarter. It was initially a center for one of Birmingham's many skilled trades, and in its post-industrial form, a thriving arts and leisure area — as well as home to affluent and chic businesses.

When the Hub was walled off, it swallowed up the Jewellery Quarter so that only Insiders had access. At that time, Birmingham still had a working class with money to spend... so a new district arose to take that money from them. A little way west of The Hub, close enough to benefit from a vague aura of grandeur, restaurants, bars, performance spaces and shops sprang up in what came to be known as "Diamond Mile": like The Jewellery Quarter but bigger, flashier, and altogether more exciting.

That was great until Central's economy collapsed and, like almost every other metropolis in the Protectorate, most of the population was reduced to living on meagre UN handouts. People didn't want upscale restaurants anymore. Nor could they afford them.

Bars got cheaper. Strip clubs, brothels, fight clubs, and Soma parlours moved in. Criminal gangs carved up the area as a great source of income.

These days you can get anything you want in Diamond Mile. Anything.

Some of the venues are relatively above board. Dancers and sex workers get paid fairly and kept safe from violent customers, the drinks and drugs aren't cut with anything dangerous. Some of the bars, especially along the main strip, Hagley Road, are great live music venues. Other venues are much, much less scrupulous about the pleasures they offer.

Protectorate police try not to go into Diamond Mile if they don't have to, and LSC charge extra for doing so, which effectively means the area is a no-go zone unless something goes exceptionally wrong.

THE ZONE

This fight club moves around: it's so lucrative that venues compete to host it. A lot of fights are brutal but conventional: bare-knuckle boxing, mixed martial arts, or no-holds-barred slugfests where trained fighters hyped up on Stallion tear each other to literal shreds. There's always one "special event" on the bill, though. A year ago, there was a trend for ex-convicts resleeved into juvenile bodies. Now it's animal fighting. Swans are popular, as are foxes. There's a persistent rumor that the fighters in question are people sleeved into animals. That would be so wildly illegal, it wouldn't even fly in Diamond Mile. Or so most people like to believe.

GOD-FORMS

Do you want to have sex with a god? Just about any god, from any pantheon? That's God-Forms' USP. It's expensive enough that for most people it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and employees of God-Forms are regularly hired as decoration or entertainment at parties in The Hub. The "deities" are heavily augmented, to the point that some can't survive outside the club's controlled environment, and a lot of those augments take their toll on a body... or a mind.

The club's private rooms are styled as temples and holy places, set up with technology to produce minor "miracles", and pumped full of a weak strain of Merge to make the experience as convincing and immersive as it can be.

Every day and night there are protests outside God-Forms. A handful of people with religious conviction — or just respect for other people's convictions, or concern for the health of heavily

augmented, frequently drugged, "deities" — show up dutifully to hand out pamphlets, wave signs,

and try to remind the clientele that if there is an afterlife, theirs will not be enjoyable. To most people who frequent God-Forms, this just adds to the establishment's charm.

THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION

The Doors of Perception is technically classified as a hotel. That's because you can rent a room there for a couple of hours or a couple of days. Most guests are all but completely unaware of their surroundings. The Doors of Perception offers a range of escapist services. The most affordable are fully immersive VR fantasies, pre-programmed or bespoke to the buyer. The next step up, and available only if you know exactly how to ask for them, is memory-jacking, courtesy of some of the finest dippers in Central. This is considerably more expensive, and new customers are likely to be told this service does not exist.

The highest-priced, and most categorically off-menu, offering is the drug Echo, the active ingredient of which is rendered down cortical stacks. For a few minutes, an hour with a strong batch and a little luck, you can experience the condensed, compressed, life experience of dozens or hundreds of fellow human beings. Users find it difficult to put the experience into words. It isn't "being another person": each dose contains too many discarded human consciousnesses for that. It isn't a coherent experience, and it isn't always pleasant... but it is always ecstatic, and most importantly, the high never fades: no one has ever developed a tolerance for Echo. Or so it's said.

GOLDEN WOK

This small, family owned restaurant has been in Diamond Mile since it was a pleasant, middle-class leisure district. While the menu promises “traditional Cantonese cuisine” it’s more of a historical curiosity: Cantonese food adapted to a centuries-old British palate. Jenny and Ying Lee currently run the restaurant, and they work hard to preserve its status as one of the few pieces of neutral ground in Diamond Mile. Locals know better than to take their fights into Golden Wok. Every single gang eats for free there, values it as a safe, calm place in the middle of the area’s chaos and conflict, and will ruthlessly turn on anyone who disturbs that peace.

NOTABLE RESIDENTS

MAG DARVISH

Even a place like Diamond Mile needs its protectors. There are a lot of waifs and strays for local gangs and businesses to take advantage of, and Mag has made it her personal business to do just that. A transwoman of Iranian descent, Mag runs The Fire Station, one of Diamond Mile’s more above-board bars. She rents out the rest of the building above the bar as a halfway house for those in need, albeit with a strict “no drugs, no violence” rule for its residents.

Mag is in a position where she could easily be pushed around by the local gangs — except that she’s good with people, skilled at making more friends than enemies. Her service to the community helps on that front: not everyone stays on the straight and narrow after leaving her care, and because of that, she’s got some dangerous friends in high places.

DIONYSUS

Once upon a time, Dionysus was Jeremy Fairfax, second son of a family of Meths. He tried to stage a coup against his mother, Helena, played his cards all wrong, and was quickly and severely cut off from the family. He crash landed at rock bottom and washed up in God-Forms, where he’s undergone so many augmentations that his own family wouldn’t recognise him. He’s addicted to a whole cocktail of substances that keep his mind addled and his past largely forgotten. In his more lucid moments, people tend to assume he’s either losing his mind or trying out different roles.

CHERRY VALENTINE

Plenty of deals get done in Diamond Mile, from drug trades to sharing information. Some of these deals are done so off the books that they don’t want anyone catching wind that they were involved. For these deals, Cherry has become the go-to neutral party to stand in for one side or the other.

Cherry is a short, chubby twenty-something who’s been living rough in Diamond Mile since he was a teenager. He got his start running for local gangs, and after getting a gig as a server at Golden Wok, he’s branched out to serve as a go-between when identities can’t be known. He has a few dead drops scattered around the neighborhood that he checks on twice a week. Those wanting to use his services leave a location for what’s to be exchanged, a name for who it goes to, and a receipt to show money’s been transferred to him.

LONG LARTIN PRISON

This prison holds 50,000 serious, Category A offenders: the UB's highest classification, meaning that these offenders would pose a serious risk to the public or national security if released... or if they were to escape. Many of them are serving life, or multiple life, sentences.

Around five hundred prisoners have "feet on the ground." They're mostly people with religious coding, but a few have pre-existing ego degradation issues or other conditions that would adversely affect them if they served their sentences digitally. They're watched over by a small force of well-armed human guards and their behaviour and mental health is closely monitored by both human analysts and AIs.

Holding prisoners in the flesh is vastly more expensive than storing and managing them digitally, and the government's decision to maintain this small facility is controversial. The millions of people on Protectorate basic income point to all the ways the money spent on these prisoners could be used to improve their lives, and taxpayers including corporations resent every penny taken from their earnings to fund these prisoners' "luxurious" lives. The Erdington Families' lawyers use Long Lartin as a key part of their campaign for more respect for religious coding, which keeps the facility in the public eye. Meanwhile, the guards take great pride in grinding down their prisoners, making sure they don't "get off easy" by "choosing" to serve their time in the flesh.

The other 99% of Long Lartin's population only exist physically as DHF stored in massive data banks in Building Six. They serve their sentences in virtual reality, and there are ongoing questions from media and politicians as to whether this qualifies

as a violation of their human rights. Some of these prisoners have served over a century already: the term "multiple life sentences without parole" has new meaning in this post-cortical-stack world.

Those whose sentences are finite will be re-sleeved into whatever organic sleeves are available at the time of release; often the natal sleeves of newly sentenced prisoners.

Treatment in VR varies widely. While sentences are intended to be punitive — dull, almost interminably so — prisoners should not come to harm. A regulatory body in Frankfurt receives, and is supposed to review, data from all prisoner experience. In reality, the huge volume of data generated makes this impossible. The analysts and guards at Long Lartin are experts at avoiding the automated flags the review process throws up to identify mistreatment.

Prisoners with friends on the outside get an easy ride: they spend their sentences in relative luxury, often enjoying fantasies that people outside can only dream of. Prisoners who've made enemies — especially if those enemies happen to be police or security personnel — suffer. Horribly and constantly, and with all the creative malevolence that a team of talented and bored programmers can come up with in the name of justice.

Occasionally, equipment failures mean that prisoners simply cease to exist. In 2356, a catastrophic failure of the prison's main and backup power supplies caused the deaths of 3% of Long Lartin's digital prisoners. An inquest determined that the failure was "unavoidable and accidental" — but the inquest was carried out by a division of Long Lartin Enterprises, so perhaps the result was unsurprising. No official processes were changed as a result of the incident,

but if you know the right people, it's now possible to have your, or your family member's, data backed up in off-site storage.

No visits are permitted except by law enforcement personnel, specifically for the purpose of gathering evidence on active or cold cases.

Prisoners leave Long Lartin with a huge range of issues: existing mental health conditions become more severe and new ones spring to life. The majority of prisoners return to the world with complex PTSD in any number of forms. Some are completely unable to differentiate reality from VR — which means many end up dead, hospitalised, or back in prison in very short order.

No attempt at rehabilitation is made and support after release is negligible. The recidivism rate is close to 100%, but when Long Lartin's storage capacity is almost infinite and the cost of VR sentences is minuscule, this statistic hasn't attracted a great deal of concern.

NOTABLE INMATES

CRYSTAL HOOPER

Crys is serving three consecutive life sentences for import and supply of illegal narcotics. Those words really don't cover the extent of her record. She used to run the Soul Market, providing highs mixed from discarded DHF before the word "Ego" even entered users' vocabulary. She is responsible for the destruction of thousands, probably hundreds of thousands, of cortical stacks and the consequent loss of vast amounts of DHF.

Authorities still hold a faint hope that they'll get her to tell them what happened to the fortune she

made throughout her career: however painstakingly they hunted, it vanished as soon as she was arrested. That much money could give Central's government a lot of leverage to push back against the corporations, for a while.

CLIVE LEWIS

Murder isn't a very serious crime in Central, or anywhere else, in the 24th century. Except the way Clive did it. Clive caused the Real Deaths of seven women over three years, in the mistaken belief that they were his ex-partner, Leah Humble. She left a relationship with him and disappeared so completely that Clive was sure she must have re-sleeved to throw him off the trail. He stalked his victims, carefully building cases against each of them that hinged on flawed logic and circumstantial evidence of their identity — things like "same laugh" — and then when he confronted them and they denied all knowledge of Leah Humble and opposed any plea to take him back, he killed them, destroying sleeves and stacks alike. Every time, he thought he'd found Leah, and he'd never need to kill again. Then he found another woman who convinced him it was "the real her," and the cycle started over again.

Clive's case was media gold: people were glued to it for months, when he was caught and sent to trial. And somehow, someone was sympathetic. Campaigns were started, claiming LSC and police misconduct, evidence tampering, and mistrials. Evidence tampering did occur (the police weren't about to let Clive walk free, and they couldn't get him to confess), and it looks very much like Clive's latest appeal might succeed. That would put an unrepentant serial killer back on the streets of Central.

Leah Humble's still alive, and she's been watching the appeal's progress with growing horror. She's saved up almost enough money to hire an assassin, if that's the right word for someone who can find and destroy one parcel of DHF amongst thousands and destroy it with extreme prejudice.

MURRAY BROWDER

Murray Browder didn't kill, or even hurt anyone. He didn't steal, or threaten, or endanger anyone's freedoms. He just made some minor revisions to history, as it was recorded and relayed to citizens of United Britain. That is to say, he claimed that Francis Gore, a former Governor of Central, was an AI created by a corporate cabal, planted in the election race to infiltrate and undermine the legitimate government.

Murray did a phenomenal job of seeding this absolutely false information throughout the media, and adjusting public and private records to support the theory. That was bad. The piece de resistance was that he hacked Gore's DHF and made him believe, and confess to it. The best answer anyone's ever received when Murray's questioned on his motives was "didn't like his face."

Murray is imprisoned in the flesh: nobody's quite sure what he could do, if he was spun up in VR, but the prisons governors don't want to find out.

NOTABLE STAFF

REX DOUGHERTY

Rex got deeply in debt studying History at university, a decision which he now deeply regrets. Parents with high aspirations but a weak grip on reality convinced themselves, and him, that this would land him a stable executive position in a minor corporation. They were wrong. Rex counts himself lucky he's got a job at all.

He works in the physical side of the prison, watching over the prisoners who serve out their sentences in their sleeves. He has complicated feelings about both sides of Long Lartin's operations; about the purpose of incarceration, and what it means to extend a sentence long beyond a natural human lifespan, but he has really simple feelings on one thing: if he's ever going to pay off his debts, he needs a second income stream. Therefore, Rex sells visiting time with prisoners to anyone who can pay, from loved ones who just want more time with their family member, to media crews, to curious fans.

Other than that, he's a thoughtful, kind man, with the build of a tank. He's decent to the prisoners. He doesn't even take much of a cut from the contraband he helps sneak into the prison.

MORGAN BEXLEY-SMITH

Morgan is one of the many people who monitor and maintain the prisoners serving virtual time. There are very tight guidelines about the treatment of those prisoners, but they are routinely ignored at Long Lartin: everyone knows there's very little UN oversight, and the team are good at covering their tracks. Morgan thinks of herself as a vigilante, making prisoners' sentences as tough as they deserve, regardless of what the judiciary thinks is appropriate.

Beyond that, she's the poster girl for Long Lartin: she's photogenic and likable, and she talks passionately about her important work making sure justice is done. She's in recruitment campaigns, publicity coverage, and she's trotted out for any media visits. Morgan knows it would be extremely hard for the prison to fire her, if her actions ever came to light. Everyone else on her team knows it too, so her approach has become the default at Long Lartin.