

MARKET PANIC

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CONTENTS & CREDITS

THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

DRONING ON

DISPATCHES FROM THE EDGE:

A Day in the Life of Karl Denisovich

Waking Up

The Commute

The Work Day Begins

The Break Room

The Conference Call

Lunch

Causes of Discontent

Stagnant Career

Money

Addiction

Family

Karl: Status Check

The Afternoon

Clocking Out

An Evening Out

COURTING DISASTER

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND

A HALF CENTURY OF JUDICIAL EXPEDIENCY

Aztechnology Crisis

GOD of the New Matrix

A Fake Justice and Looming Head Crash

Megacorporate Revision

The Justices

Zurich-Orbital Habitat: Above You in Every Sense

ARES

GOD OF WAR

More Than Just Guns

HISTORY

CURRENT EVENTS

The Broken Sword

The New Face of War

Outbreak Containment

Just say No: The War on Bugs

Killed in Action

6

10

10

10

10

11

14

15

17

18

20

20

20

20

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

21

A Wretched Hive of Scum and Villainy

Boardroom Shuffle

Meet the New CO, Same as the Old CO

Courts-Martial

Foreign Relations

CULTURE

TABLE OF ORGANIZATION

PERSONNEL

Commanding officers

Daniel Knight

Arthur Vogel

Leonard Aurelius

Issues

Daniel Truman

Michele Borden

Clayton Wilson

DIVISIONS

Ares Arms

Ares Consumer Products

Ares Heavy Industry

Ares Services

Ares Global Entertainment

AresSpace

Knight Errant Security Services

WAR IN THE SHADOWS

Running for Ares

Running against Ares

AZTECHNOLOGY

FINGERS ON YOUR PULSE

Their PR Machine Is Well-Oiled and Subtle

They Make Things People Like

They Make Their Good Fights Public and

Keep Their Bad Fights Private

They "Give Back" in Carefully Planned Ways

Their Darkest Secrets Are Well and Truly Buried

A Brief History of the Big A

The Cartel Roots

Acquiring a Nation

Operation Reciprocity

45

45

45

46

46

47

48

49

49

49

51

51

51

51

53

53

53

53

54

54

54

55

55

56

56

57

57

58

59

59

60

61

62

62

62

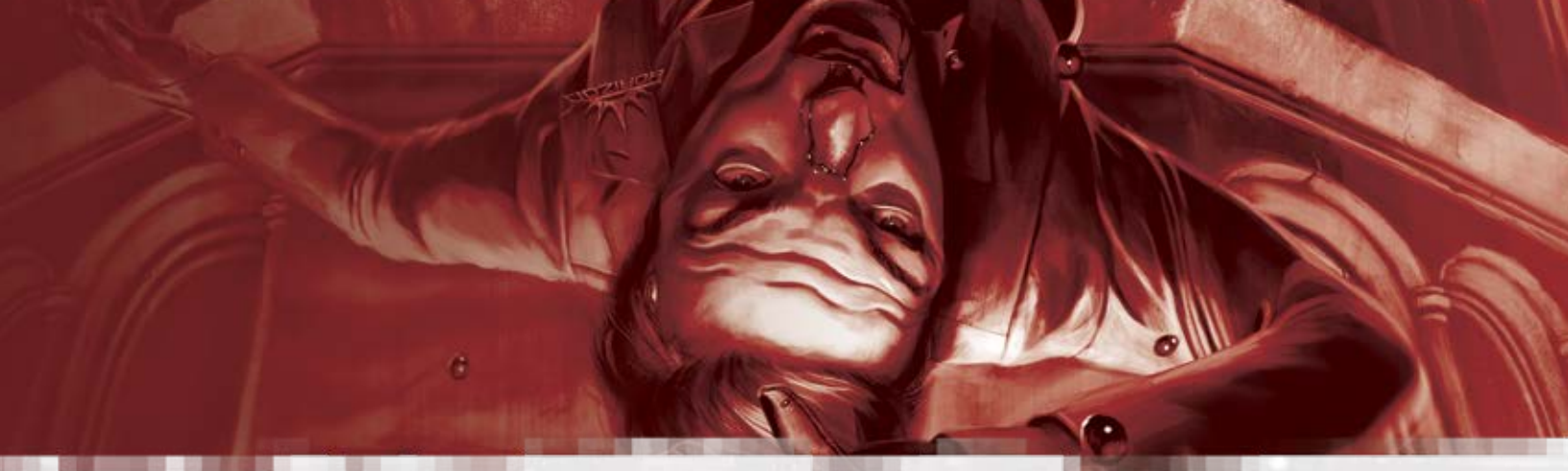
63

63

63

64





Anyone Can Have a Bad Decade	64	HISTORY	91
Southern Expansion	65	CURRENT EVENTS	92
Famine and Sympathy	65	Falling Stars	93
The Aggressive Now	66	Denial of Service	93
The Top of the Pyramid	66	Consensus 2.0	94
Flavia de la Rosa	66	The Long Slide into Darkness	94
Domingo Chavez	67	Ethics Calculus	95
Domingo "Ding" Ramos	67	Tabula Rasa	95
Motecuhzoma	68	Playing with Fire(arms)	96
J.J. Harvin, Jr.	68	Render Unto Caesar	96
Necali Xólotl	68	HORIZON: ONE BIG, HAPPY FAMILY	96
Marisol Deocampo	68	Welcome to the Echo Chamber	96
Aztechnology Organization	69	Smiling Your Way to the Top	97
Aztechnology North America	69	The Upper Echelon	98
Aztechnology Latin America	69	NOTABLE SUBDIVISIONS	98
Aztechnology Europe	70	Charisma Associates	98
Aztechnology Australasia	70	The Horizon Project	100
Aztechnology Africa	70	Horizon Transglobal	100
Aztechnology in the Shadows	71	Pathfinder Multimedia	101
Running for Aztechnology	71	Singularity	101
Running Against Aztechnology	71	The Dawkins Group	102
EVO	72	MITSUHAMAMA COMPUTER TECHNOLOGIES	104
HISTORIC EVOLUTION	73	HISTORY	105
Corporate Culture	75	Corporate Culture	108
TODAY'S EVO	75	Modern Mitsuhamama	108
Nuevo CEO	75	Top of the Heap	108
Strato Cumulus	76	Future Endeavors	113
Taylor Dacopral	77	NEONET	118
Cynthia Bills	77	Past	119
Ysil	78	JRJ International	120
Abhi Kala	79	Fuchi	120
The New EVOLution	79	Novatech	120
(a.k.a. Ducking the Blame)	79	Erika	120
The Monad Matter	82	Transsys-Neuronet	121
TOMORROW IS A MYSTERY	82	Trans-Latvia Enterprises	122
A Brand New Evo ... errr ... MetaSkindustries	83	NeoNET	122
Sewing Yakut	85	Present	123
HORIZON	88	St. Louis Wins Internal Vote for New NeoNET HQ	123
SPINNING THE SPIN	89	Dying Family Tree	124



Future	125	Extractions	150
Celedyr: Where Does a Great Dragon Land?	125	Making Money	151
Malmstein: Anders Ain't Nobody's Fool	126	(Data) Core Business	151
Trans-Latvia Enterprises	128	Services	151
Villiers and Spinrad	128	Government Services	152
Going Down Kicking and Screaming	129	Education	152
RENRAKU	134	Entertainment	153
FACING EAST	135	Products	154
What Has Come Before	135	Consumer Goods	154
In the Beginning ...	135	Fashion	154
Three Years in Heaven	137	Cybernetics	154
Three Years in Hell	137	Motor Vehicles	154
The Ghost Decade	138	Agriculture	154
Renraku Today	138	Other Major Sectors	155
It's All in Who You Know	138	SAEDER-KRUPP	156
Chairman of the Board, Shikei Nakatomi	138	TALES OF A DRAGON EMPIRE	157
President Orito Sasaki	139	Rise of the Giant	157
CEO Eternal Inazo Aneki	139	Attack on a Titan	159
Botan Nakada	140	One step Ahead Again	160
Where's the party?	140	THE S-K MACROCOSM	161
Renraku Asia	140	General Structure	161
Renraku Asia: India	141	Core Business	162
Renraku Asia: China	141	Crack Industry and Construction	162
Renraku Asia: Indonesia	141	Manufacturing and Engineering	163
Renraku Oceania	141	Chemical Production and Processing	163
Renraku Oceania: Australia	142	Resources and Recycling	163
Renraku Oceania: Philippines	142	Infrastructure	164
Renraku Europa	142	Finance	164
Renraku Europa: United Kingdom	143	Matrix and Computer Systems	164
Renraku Europa: France	143	Magical Research	165
Renraku Africa	143	Other Areas	165
Renraku North America	143	Media	165
Renraku South America	144	Consumer Goods and Service	165
Corporate Culture	144	Agriculture	165
The Home Office	145	Space Assets	166
Regional Offices	145	INSIDE SAEDER-KRUPP	166
Everybody's Friend	145	DRACONIC NEO-FEUDALISM	168
Conservatism	146	Global Management	168
Corporate Samurai	146	Lofwyr	168
The Red Samurai	148	Corporate Oversight Office	168
The Red Ninja	149	Public Relations	169
Running for Renraku	149	Global Human Resources	169
Running Against Renraku	150		

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Finance	169	DENS AND HOARDS	176
Law	169	Neu-Essen	176
Global Operations	169	THE DRAGON'S WRATH	177
S-K Africa	169	SHIAWASE	178
S-K Asia	170	LEADERSHIP CURRENT CHALLENGES	180
S-K Australia	170	MAJOR DIVISIONS TO WATCH IN 2078 AND BEYOND	186
S-K Europe	170	Shiawase Biofood	186
S-K Middle East	170	Shiawase Biotech	187
S-K North America	171	Shiawase Envirotech	189
S-K South America	171	Shiawase Manufacturing	190
Portfolio Development and Market Forces	171	WUXING	192
Security and Armed Forces	172	HISTORY	193
Security Forces	172	OPERATIONS	196
Corporate Military	172	Finances	196
Corporate Intelligence	172	Shipping and Logistics	197
Innenrevision	172	Consumer Goods	199
S-K Prime	173	Magical Goods and Services	201
DRACO PROXY	173	Medical Services	201
Lobbyists and Henchmen	173	MAJOR PLAYERS	202
Vanadis Hyvönen	173	Sharon Chang-Wu	202
Claudia Romanov	174	James Harper-Smythe	203
Julian Sergetti	174	Wu Lung-Wei	203
Harold Two Moon	174	Fu Peng	205
In the Dragon's Shadow	174	Quints	205
Awrah	174	Jing Shi: Adjuster	206
Hans Brackhaus	175		
Basima Oriol Diasruiz	175		
Scale	176		

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THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

Trapped in the moment, bullets shredding gentrified townstone around him, Karl Denisovich just wants to go home. Next to him, snap-shooting around the corner is Fortinbras, caseless ammunition leaving the distinct tang in the air Karl knows from video games. The adrenaline rush is multiplied by a thousand, exponential. Clutching a real gun for the first time. Real danger. No sales reports. This is *way* better than *Awakening: 1949*.

"If the Comanche closes in on us, we'll wish we were dead, omae," Fortinbras says as he ducks back around the corner. He shows Karl a grenade. "This'll take care of that. Never let them take you alive, right?"

Karl nods uncertainly. Down the block, more Comanche Mafia appear, catching the team in a classic pincer movement. Karl knows this because he's directed such maneuvers as Sgt. "Smokin'" Joe Esterhaus, hero of Normandy. But it's different from the ground level, he thinks, as a rocket takes out the apartment directly above him. Rain of glass in slow-motion, diamond tears like in that commercial, the one for the new Stuffer Shack shake. Turns out, time slows down in these situations. Karl thought it was just something devs programmed into the game.

Pi, their decker (he liked being able to say that, "their"), bleeds out in the narrow alley between the two apartment buildings. Kaiser, their de facto leader, buzzed DocWagon

three times, but the Comanche Mafia jammed their broadcast. No last-minute wagon rescues like on *STAT!* for Karl. Smokin' Joe would cowboy up, so Karl does the same. All the adrenaline surging, backed by the Dexedrine analog burning through his veins, Karl opens up on the flanking group. Slight crouch, lean into the recoil. Squeeze the trigger, don't flinch. The H&K jumps in his hands like the seizures his brother had as a kid.

Blood as he gets one in the gap between her ceramic armor plates. The woman falls. Buzzing snap of a bullet that's already passed him by the time the sound reaches his ear. Kaiser screaming in a whoop of fury and joy, his own H&K barrel glowing so white hot Karl can see the bullets raging through.

And all of it just like the game, only so much more so.

It's forty-eight hours earlier and Karl is just another drone hanging out with his co-workers at a 1980s-themed bar in Redmond. The place tries too hard to be ironically hip, and Karl doesn't want to be there anyway. He's afraid he's going to get fired after what he found out at the office today, so he's milking his coworkers for information, or "intel" as Shin Yamazaki calls it in *UCAS Vat Ninja Reborn*. Karl's a drone, but he's a burn-out. Lately, he thinks he missed his calling and should have run the

