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BY STEPHEN MICHAEL DiPESA AND PHIL BRUCATO

CREDITS

Authors: Stephen Michael DiPesa and Phil Brucato.
World of Darkness created by Mark Rein•Hagen
Storyteller game system designed by Mark Rein•Hagen

Development: Bill Bridges

Editing: Ana Balka

Art Direction: Aileen E. Miles

Interior Art: Leif Jones, Jeff Laubenstein, Alex Sheikman, Melissa Uran

Cover Art: Christopher Shy

Front and Back Cover Design: Aileen E. Miles

Layout and Typesetting: Aileen E. Miles

COMING SOON FOR MAGE:



1554 LITTON DR.
STONE MOUNTAIN, GA
30083
USA

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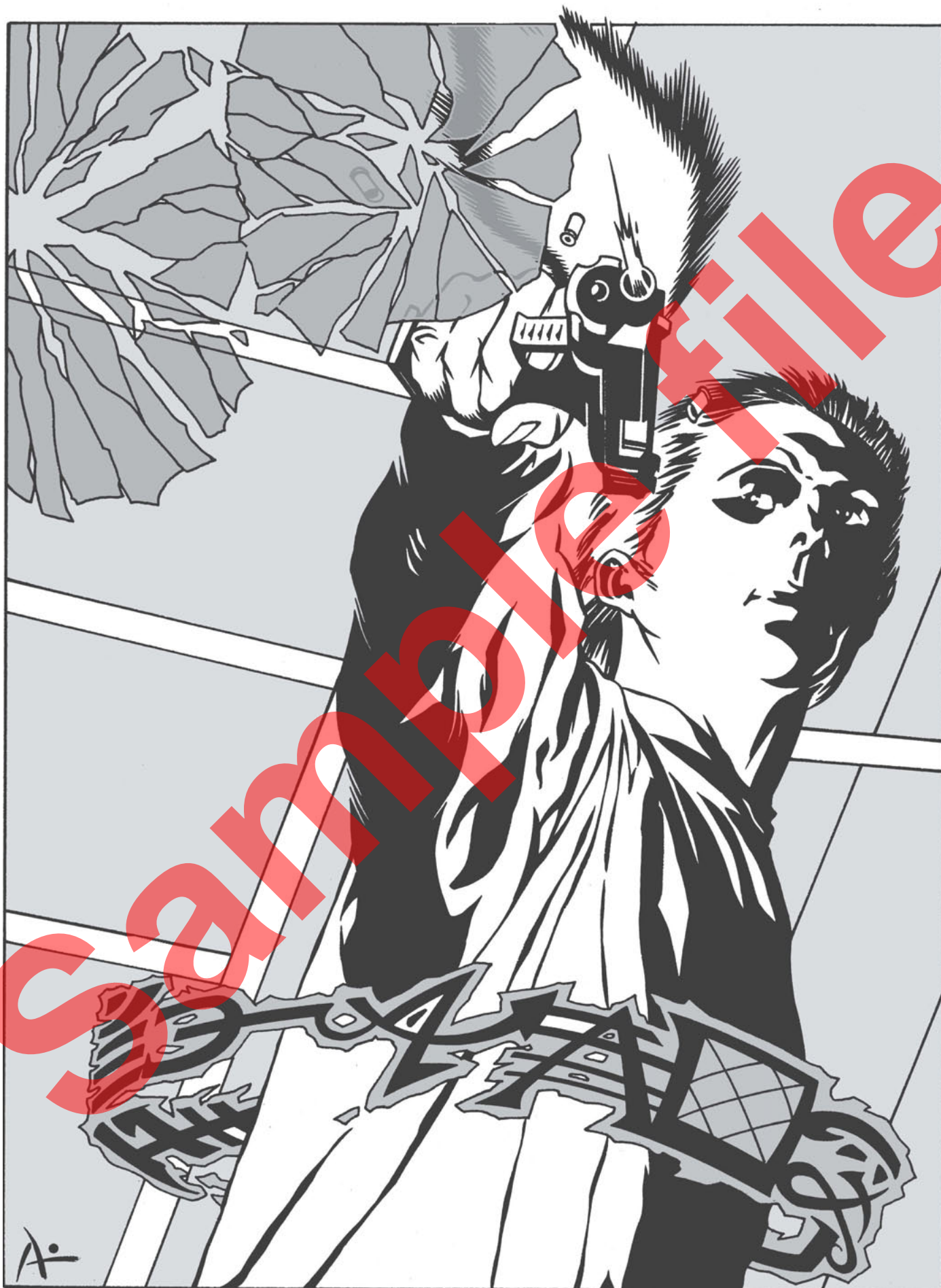
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TRADITION BOOK: ORDER

HERMES

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PROLOGUE: RENEGADE



The man did not *look* like a dangerous psychopath. His sandy-blond hair was thinning, and his light-brown eyes reflected none of the desperate gleam of madness. Even his gray sweater, now stained with the blood of at least one security guard, carried with it an air of the hopelessly mundane. He smiled weakly as he turned to face Augustus, brushing a few stray locks of hair out of his face with his unbloodied left hand.

"Pembroke," he said casually, as if he addressed a workplace colleague en route to the elevator. Augustus did not relax, did not take his hand off the Glock 17 holstered at his hip.

"Richard, it's time to go," said Augustus levelly, but forcefully.

"Just a moment, Pembroke," replied Richard Priest, bani Flambeau, "I have a few more things to see to here before I head out. I'd be more than happy to leave with you then. This will just take me another five minutes or so."

Augustus slowly drew his gun. Something in the Flambeau's tone told him that, although he was perfectly lucid, he had no intention of leaving before his work here was done. Pointing his gun downward for the moment, the Tytalan pressed. "Richard, it's time to leave *now*. You are not finishing what you came here to do. I can't let you."

Richard absently studied an unremarkable expanse of corridor wall but seemed shaken from his contemplation by Augustus' statement. He glanced over at the other mage, sighing with an empty smirk. "I figured you might say that. It's sad, too. I expected you to understand. *Shit or get off the pot.*"

The words stung Augustus, though he allowed his face to betray no hint of it. He had uttered those very words to Richard just over three years ago, when the man had been a mild, gentle-hearted Bonisagus. Of course, when he petitioned for membership in House Flambeau a year later, just two weeks after the Technocratic raid, they had proven more than happy to admit an Adept verging on Mastery into their ranks.

Richard continued, "I know what a lot of folks in the Order are saying about me after the cannery incident, and especially after the blackout, but I can see, in my heart, what needs to be done. If it were vengeance, Augustus, I'd be hunting down the families of Technocrats, wouldn't I? I'm just illustrating to the Sleepers that the tools of the Technocracy are ultimately no more trustworthy or benevolent than the Order of Reason once made our ways out to be. Surely, you can see the logic in that?"

"But a nuclear power plant, Richard?" Augustus hissed, now gripping the gun tightly, "You'll kill hundreds — no, tens of thousands of people."

"I know," Richard whispered, looking pained and ashamed, though resolute. "I've seen what a nuclear blast does to those at ground zero and what it does to those caught in the fallout zone. I am not proud of what I'm doing, Pembroke."

"Then stop doing it," Augustus replied, easing off the safety of his weapon.

"You know, Pembroke," Richard retorted, never losing that hollow and heartless half-smile, "I recall saying almost that very thing to that Man in Black, right before he shot my baby girl in the face: *Please, stop*. It's all

I could think to say. It's the kind of thing a desperate man says when inevitability is about to steamroll him and shatter his world."

"You can't punish these Sleepers for the deaths of your wife and daughter," Augustus shot back, now beginning to run through Ars Virium countermagics in his head. Once, Richard had been a great student of the mysteries of the Ars Potentiae, but now his command of the Order's foundation Sphere had grown to eclipse even his considerable knowledge of the Prime arts.

"I'm not punishing them, Pembroke," Richard said, as though explaining the matter to a child. "I'm trying to help them pierce the illusion of comfort and safety that is strangling the Earth. Time and again, we have seen that only fear and the threat of pain have the power to move the Sleepers to change perspective. Do you agree that we have a duty to protect them, Pembroke?"

"Of course," the Tytalan replied.

Richard chuckled grimly. "And what if you had to allow harm to come to a thousand of them in order to give a million the strength to save themselves? What does your Tytalan training tell you about burning away weakness and the survival of the fittest?"

"My training?" Augustus asked. He then returned Richard's bleak smile. "It tells me that your madness is a weakness within our Order and that your campaign of retribution dies tonight."

Just then, however, Augustus slipped up. In the course of mentally reciting Forces countermagics, he quietly uttered two syllables of his spell aloud. It was no louder than a whispered mutter, but Augustus did not doubt that Richard had mystically augmented his senses for this one-man raid. He knew.

And, strangely, he did not appear to be concerned in the slightest.

But Augustus knew that Richard Priest, while determined, was not arrogant. His control of the Ars Virium did not outstrip the Tytalan's own by so great a degree that he could afford to dismiss Augustus' magics so completely. But what was his angle? As Richard closed his eyes and spoke a short Enochian command under his breath, flaming sigils burned in the air around him, and Augustus realized.

The Tytalan raised his gun and fired three shots, crushing the flask of fragrant oil in his jacket pocket with his left hand as he did so, weaving Prime countermagics instead. Richard's attempt to burn out the Patterns of the bullets glanced off of Augustus' powerful spell and two slugs took him in the thighs, while the third hit him in the stomach. As he crumpled in pain, the Tytalan wove more powerful enchantments, centering the general antimagic on Richard. The Flambeau looked up.

"Are you going to kill me?"

Augustus knocked him unconscious with a blow to the head from the butt of his pistol. "That's for the Quaesitori to decide." He took his cellular phone from his jacket with his bleeding left hand and dialed a number from its memory. "Julian, it's done. I need a gateway."

As a spatial distortion opened in the air and Augustus Pembroke, bani Tytalus left the Seabrook Nuclear Power Plant with his captive slung over his shoulder, he could not help but wonder what was gained here tonight, and what was lost.