the bulldrek and tell you the truth. I can't guarantee you'll *like* it, but if you want to hear it anyway, read on.

- You want the truth? You can't *handle* the truth!
- Slamm-0!

Different shrinks define "trauma" differently, but to me, trauma happens when you get hurt in a way that destroys your sense of safety. How does safety come in? Again, I'm not a shrink, but one thing I've seen in the times I've dealt with trauma is that nobody's ever prepared for it. What's safety besides peace of mind, a shield against the fear of the unknown?

Soldiers come back from eighteen months in a war zone and can't stop looking for ambushes, no matter how secure their environment is. Wageslaves lock their doors to feel safe, but after someone breaks into their house, even the best maglock won't let them sleep at night. People who are mugged or have their homes swept away by a tidal wave have mental scars long after their physical lives have been rebuilt, because they can never restore the belief that "it'll never happen to me."

WHAT WE DEAL WITH

What's it like when you start to crack? You snap at your teammates, and wish you could just go back to your bunk and sleep for a week. Your boots feel ten kilos heavier than yesterday because you stared at the ceiling all night, worrying about what would happen next time you're on the job. You aren't sure you can handle it anymore, not sure your team can handle it, and the thought makes you sick to your stomach. Between being exhausted all the time and worrying all the time, your mind's not on your work, and people start noticing your thousand-meter stare.

When the firefight starts, instead of your training taking over and zeroing you in on doing your job, all that stress and fatigue boils over inside you, and you freeze while you try to wrestle it down and act. If you're really, really lucky, that freeze didn't just cost you and your teammates their lives.

Off the job, life isn't really any better. You feel like you're made of sugar-glass wound into a tight spring— fragile, brittle, ready to crack if someone so much as bumps you the wrong way, and a hair's breadth from lashing out at any perceived threat. Once, when I came back to Atlanta after a trip to Amazonia, I had an episode and broke some slot's jaw. Why? He'd been following me for two blocks and happened to be wearing the colors of a gang I'd fought against in Bogotá, then gave me drek when I confronted him about it. Not my finest moment.

The worst thing about civilians—or for us, non-shadowrunners—is that they're unpredictable. Inside your own community, whether it's the shadows or a military base, you can pretty well guess how most people are

going to act. Yes, shadowrunners go out of their way to conceal their intentions, but there are certain protocols everyone follows, especially if they're trying *not* to look like they're about to stab you in the back. Around civilians, it's not nearly that predictable; you never know when something that could set you off is lurking down the street or around the next corner.

Between having to restrain yourself around civilians and knowing most of them would probably think you're a psycho if they knew what was going through your head, you start isolating yourself from society. It doesn't feel like a huge loss when none of them understands you anyway. In the Marines we had mandated counseling sessions every month, but they're usually a waste of time—why see a shrink when talking about what you've been through is just going to make *them* burst into tears? (No drek, I've seen it happen.)

Then there's the parts of combat stress that you see in the trids, the flashbacks and nightmares of all the things you wish you could forget. In the Marines, we called stuff like that "critical events," to keep us from dwelling on how we just saw a brother-in-arms get splattered across a Bogotá street by an IED, or finding the victim of an Azzie blood sacrifice lying on a stone altar with gashes over her body and terror on her face, or how your arm can hurt so much when it's metal and the real one is back in …

… y'know, maybe calling them "critical events" isn't such a bad idea.

- Ghost, Jess, you never told me any of this.
- Pistons

- Can you blame me? I don't want to think about it any more than you do.
- Hard Exit

HOW WE DEAL

When the cracks start showing, a support network is the difference between "having a bad day" and a strug-

gle that lasts months or years, if not the rest of your life. Soldiers rely on the unit, the guys and girls neck-deep in the same bulldrek you are. For shadowrunners, it's the team you work with, or the contacts you know will listen to you when you're twelve beers and five shots down and can't stop thinking about "that run you went on." Anyone who says they can deal with the stresses of our job solo is either lying or already gone.

If you catch it early enough, many cases of combat stress (or "acute stress," if you're a civilian) can be lessened or prevented by something as simple as a hot meal and what passes for a good night's sleep. Surprised? Remember that the key word in all this is *stress*. Most people deal with everyday stress by getting some R&R. Some people just have a different definition of "everyday stress" than others.

- A lot of civilians think the most stressful part of life as a soldier is being in combat or getting wounded, but really, we don't worry about it any more than most hackers worry about black IC. Sure, there are risks, but they're *expected* risks—those are just part of the job. It's the ones that come out of nowhere and catch you off-guard that keep you up at night.
- Picador

The other best defense against combat stress is training. One reason soldiers spend so much time training their skills is that training for combat situations makes them familiar, and familiarity reduces the shock value of danger. Another reason is to make your reactions into muscle memory, instinctive instead of conscious, because in combat, the difference between success and failure (and life or death) is measured by the time it takes to pull a trigger. Training is what lets you act *now*, instead of having to think of what your DI told you or snap yourself out of a daze.

Unfortunately, there isn't really a "shadowrunner boot camp" where newbie runners can go to have important drek drilled into their heads, and a lot of us can't or don't want to serve in the military. The only "training" most shadowrunners get is experience, which is another reason it's so important to have a team or other support network—you'll (hopefully) keep each other alive long enough to learn from your mistakes.

- It might shock some of you to hear this, but despite being the very model of a modern shadow privateer, even I have a few close chummers I've turned to when things were at their hairiest. They might not admit it, but only stupid and dead captains don't know the value of having people around them. We just normally call them crews.
- Kane

- Sentimental *and* quoting Gilbert and Sullivan? Did I travel to a parallel dimension again?
- Winterhawk

Sometimes, though, all the preparation in the world can't prevent that one run from breaking through your defenses and digging its claws into your mind. That's when the six hours of sleep you try to get turns into a forest of nightmares. The flashbacks and paranoia start seeping into your daily routine, even when you're not on a job. Welcome to the dreaded PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder.

Since we're on the subject, I might as well mention that a lot of soldiers and shadowrunners hate the name "post-traumatic stress *disorder*." Why? It makes you feel like you're diseased somehow, or damaged goods, instead of a capable person who needs a break. Some critics see that as having too much pride, and I can't really argue with that, but they don't get how important that pride is to getting your life back on track afterward. I can't count how many times being able to see myself as a capable person instead of a helpless one has gotten me off my ass and back to my job. (Also, if you have to use the term, it's PTSD *survivor*. Calling a soldier a PTSD "victim" will get you punched in the throat.)

Now that the worst has started, how do you stop it? This'll probably sound lame and not very shadowrunner-y, but some of it means going back to the basics of taking care of yourself. Get enough sleep, preferably getting up and going to bed at the same time every day (or night). Eat properly. Exercise, both to burn off stress and because endorphins are a natural anti-depressant. Soldiers have an advantage here, since routine is built into life on base. Plus, it keeps you busy, which helps take your mind off what's happening.

Another part of dealing with post-traumatic stress is learning to relax. Trust me, that sounds a lot easier than it actually is, especially for people who have situational awareness as a job skill. Try to find two or three things that'll reliably calm you down, and make sure you can use them as often as you need. I strongly recommend *not* using any kind of drugs or chips to do that. Yes, I know it's a lot easier to chill out when you can have a drink or six, or slot a moodie and let the simsense feed do the work for you. It's also a really good way to turn yourself into an addict, which won't help anyone.

- Stress relief methods that focus you on the moment can also be used to ward off flashbacks. As stupid as this might sound, when I first got away from the Universal Brotherhood and started hunting bugs, one of the things I used to counter my tick was NERPS.
- Sticks

- NERPS? Like, the candy?
- /dev/grrl

- Yeah. So what? I like the taste, and the bugs never let us have them when I was a kid, so it's a great way to remind myself that I'm not there. When you're looking for