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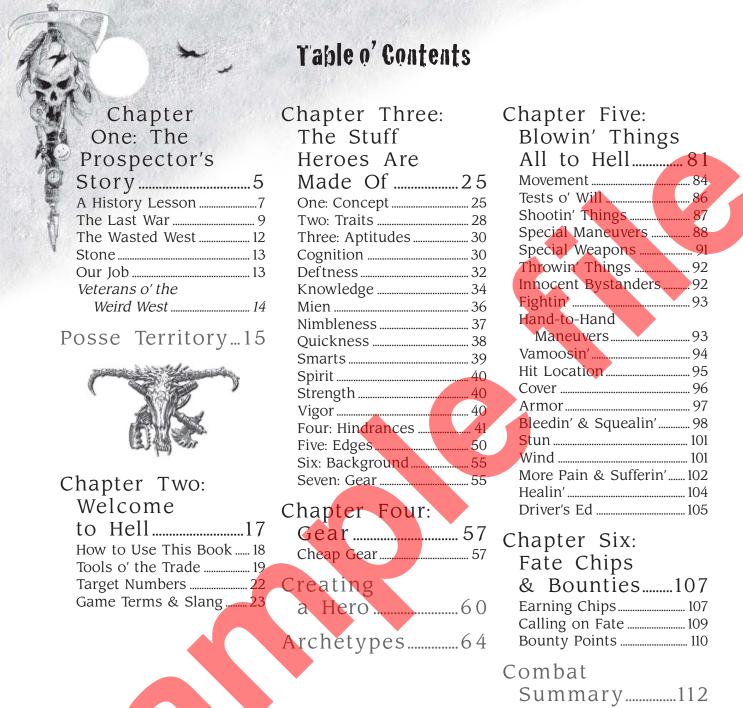
Dedicated to: Caden.

Who's raised a little Hell on Earth of his own.

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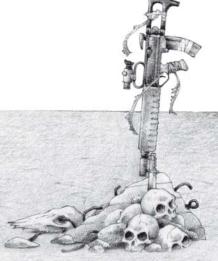
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The Prospector's Story



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Chapter One: The Prospector's Story



Get up, Ranger. I know you're groggy from yer dirt nap, but I ain't got time to wetnurse a 200-year-old piece o' meat.

Yeah, I look a little different than the last time you laid eyes on my ugly puss, but it's me, Coot Jenkins. The Prospector. Ringin' any bells, wormfood? I'm the one who stuck you in that hole 200 years ago. June 8th, 1876, if memory an' that tombstone behind you serves. Kind of a "contingency plan," y'see. In case my other little scheme didn't work.

Well, guess what? It didn't.

If your brainpan ain't too full o' bugs from all them years in the ground, you might remember I put together a couple score of your kind back then to fight the Reckoners, the monsters responsible for all the stuff that happened in the "Weird West," as the papers used to call it.

For that, me and my little undead army had to go into the spirit world—the Hunting Grounds as the Injuns say—where the Reckoners lived.

We had no problem gettin' there. It was that army o' demons waitin' on us that gave us a few problems. Worst part of it was the demons took control o' most of my stiffs and turned 'em against me. I shoulda known the same demons that keep corpses like you movin' would have an easier time gettin' control on their home turf.

We still won—the battle at least—but we lost the war. Me 'n' what was left o' the meat put down the bad ones.

Then we got "lost" somehow.

The last dozen o' my soldiers and I wandered around the Hunting Grounds for a long time before we found our way out again. I didn't know how long we was gone 'til a few weeks back. You'll see what I mean if you turn your sorry sack o' bones around and look at some o' them other tombstones.

Brace yourself, friend. It's 2094.

No use cleanin' that dirt outta yer ears, son. You heard me right. I've been back about a month. Now I'm diggin' up my reserves, and you're the first o' the lot to see the light o' day. I just hope it ain't too late fer us ta do somethin' about all o' this.

I don't know what we're gonna' do yet, but I ain't goin' back in the damn Huntin' Grounds, that's for sure! I shoulda realized the demons would have more control over your kind in their own stompin' grounds.

Worst part is, I reckon my mistake cost us pretty dear. I think they done gone and blowed the world up while we was away.

I walked a couple hundred miles to get here, and there ain't much left o' the world. The cities have been blasted, and there's hardly a tree between here and Deadwood.

It gets even worse. Y'sure you wanna hear it? Maybe you oughta wait a while and catch your breath. Don't give me that look! It's a figure o' speech.

All right, smart-ass. You wanted to know.

The Prospector's Story

The Weird West

I'll have to start from the beginnin'.
You remember when the Reckoning started? It was July 3, 1863, right when we was fightin' the Battle o' Gettysburg. No? What's been crawlin' through yer brain?

Anyhow, it actually all started a while afore that when an angry shaman by the name o' Raven led a bunch of other angry shamans into the Hunting Grounds. They had an idea about lettin' these demons called manitous loose on the world, and you know what? They did it.

How's not important. The fact is that these demons spurted back into our world and started causing trouble right away. Some folks even managed to harness the power of these filthy things. Funnier yet, some of 'em didn't even know they were doin' it.

Anyhow, these manitous set straight out to fill the world with mischief an' fear, and they did a damn good job of it. They got some help from all sorts o' critters from legend, plus some allnew things straight from the depths o' some twisted sicko's mind.

Worse yet, they got help from us by means of this stuff called ghost rock. Folks found it in the walls of the Great Maze after Raven tossed most o' California into the sea.

The Secret o' Ghost Rock

Lookin' back on it now, I see ghost rock was the Reckoners' secret weapon. I know you was dead before it got discovered in 1868 or so, but it was this "superfuel" that boomed bigger than gold. We should a known the stuff was evil the way it screams when burnt. And that smoke that looked like damned souls? It was. I know that now. Those were manitous, sealed in the stuff just waiting for—well, I'll get to that in a minute.

The Reckoners put ghost rock here on Earth. Anywhere there was coal, gold, silver, or other ores, folks was likely to find ghost rock as well. Funny thing is I don't remember a soul ever

askin' why this stuff had never been discovered before. Makes you feel kinda stupid, don't it? That the stuff would just appear overnight like that, an' none of us even questioned it.

Huh? No, I don't know how they did it.

They just did. They are freakin' supernatural.

An' I reckon any kinda monsters that can make a corpse like you wake up and ask stupid questions can make a few billion tons o' rock. Now shut up and lemme finish.

Anyway, the Reckoners put the stuff here for several reasons, though the last one's the clincher.

The first reason was to get us to fight over it. We sure did plenty o' that. Who can say how many died in the Great Rail Wars, the War Between the States, and God-knows how many claim jumpings, holdups, and robberies?

The second reason was to get us fightin' each other with weapons sure to kill lotsa folks in real painful ways. Even better, I 'spect ghost rock moved us along a little faster than we prob'ly should gone. Most o' the gadgets the "mad scientists" made were one-of-a-kind. They couldn't be made on an assembly line like Peacemakers. They was harmless enough in total, though not if you were one of the unlucky ones that got torched by a flamethrower or run over by a steam tank.

Still, enough real progress got made that all that stuff got deadlier faster than we could learn how to use it. I guess you might say technology grew faster than diplomacy. Don't look at me like that, Ranger! Just 'cause I got a bit of an accent don't mean I'm an idjit!

That's better. Anyhow, the real reason the Reckoners gave us ghost rock was because of those damned manitous inside.

Y'see, there was this thing called the "Last War" in 2081. I'll tell you more about it later on, but it ended with every nation on Earth droppin' bombs on every other. The "Apocalypse." Not a city was spared as far as I've heard.

Sure, we had ghost-rock bombs back in '76, but the ones they got here had been "irradiated." I still don't know 'xactly what that means, but the effect is to make the stuff a hundred times more powerful than it was before. Scary, ain't it?

So those bombs blew things up real good, but they did somethin' else too. Somethin' none o' them deluded scientists who invented 'em ever counted on. Y'see, that 'radiated ghost rock full o' damned spirits did more than just blow folks up. It also created "Deadlands."

In case your memory's rottin' like your face, a Deadland's a place so full o' fear it actually warps the land and gives birth to monsters drawn right out o' folk's nightmares.

And that's what the Reckoners had been waitin' on: for the whole stinkin' planet to turn into one giant Deadland. The bastards need that sorta fear to survive, kinda like a fish needs water or a prospector needs gold—or in my case, stinkin' corpses. Speakin' o' which, we gotta roll you around in a flower patch or somethin', Ranger. You're a little gamey after 200 years.